DOCTORAL LEVEL COUNSELING STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING IN A COHORT ENVIRONMENT

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Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

August 2013

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Huffman, David D. Doctoral Level Counseling Students’ Experiences and Perceptions of Learning in a Cohort Environment. Doctor of Philosophy (Counseling) August 2013, 202 pp., 2 tables, references, 103 titles.

Learning community literature supports the use of student cohorts to enhance learning through increased peer interaction and common course work. 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. The research team that analyzed the data consisted of three advanced counseling program doctoral students, each with research methods coursework. 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.
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By

David D. Huffman
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the support of so many people who have stood by me and walked with me on this exciting and challenging journey that ends with this project. I cannot imagine making the trip without the love, support and encouragement of my wife Diane. Our Friday date nights were, and still are, my weekly saving grace.

My committee members not only helped me through the dissertation process, but served as my teachers and mentors through two graduate degrees. My major professor, Delini Fernando, introduced me to the joy of group counseling and gave me her unwavering support through many ups and downs during my journey. Dee Ray helped me discover my passion and gifts for counseling by sharing her own gifts with me and I will be forever grateful. Casey Barrio Minton modeled dedication, caring and professionalism as my teacher that I take with me into my own teaching career.

I give thanks for my two friends and research team members, Emily Michero and Julia Smith, who stayed with me through a seemingly never-ending data analysis process. Their support and energy during our weekly meetings helped keep me going.

Finally, I want to thank my own cohort – the Dirty Dozen - for being my friends, partners, and teachers for the past four years. They were the inspiration for this research study and they enriched my life and my learning.
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DOCTORAL LEVEL COUNSELING STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING IN A COHORT ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

Over the last 30 years, universities in the United States have embraced the use of student cohorts to create learning communities in undergraduate and graduate programs (Stassen, 2003) to improve educational standards and student retention (MacGregor, Smith, Matthews & Gabelnick, 2002). However, cohort learning research in doctoral settings is scant (Leshem, 2007). In spite of the widespread adoption of learning communities in counselor education (Schweiger, Henderson, McCaskill, Clawson, & Collins, 2012), no research exists. This study provides initial exploration into doctoral counseling students’ experiences of cohort learning to inform the use of learning communities in counselor education.

Learning Communities

Learning communities (LCs) gained increasing support within higher education as creative strategies for fostering an interactive learning environment (MacGregor et al., 2002). Based upon a socio-cultural view of learning (Northedge, 2003), institutions formed intentional communities of learners in various settings, trusting that student interaction enhances learning. Smith (1993) noted that all LC strategies hold in common an assumption that each student possesses the power to change the learning environment.

During a time when higher education came under national scrutiny (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Stassen, 2003), educators adopted LC models to address societal concerns about the future of American education such as declining standards and rising student attrition rates. Above all, educators formed student cohorts to foster greater interaction
between student cohort members, and enhance student faculty relationships (Gabelnick et al., 1990). By focusing on a learning environment that invited greater engagement from students and faculty, reformers hoped to provide more meaningful and fulfilling learning experiences.

Educators designed LCs to provide a balance of support and challenge (Smith, 1993). Increased student interaction through collaborative learning activities served to foster supportive peer relationships as well as a more stimulating discourse. MacGregor et al. (2002) noted that familiarity within cohort learning groups afforded opportunities to encounter and explore the diverse experiences and perspectives of peers.

Throughout the history of LC models in higher education, researchers investigated how cohort environments impact student learning. Overall, results supported theoretical assumptions that underlie the rationale for LC models. However, researchers have yet to establish consensus for the impact of LCs upon certain learning outcomes. The current body of knowledge regarding LC outcomes addresses institutional, intrapersonal and interpersonal learning.

**Institutional Outcomes**

Researchers (Wallace, 2005) observed that learning communities are associated with higher levels of student retention and persistence-to-degree. Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo (1994) theorized that students who become involved in the academic and social life of their universities are more likely to remain enrolled. Studies of primarily undergraduate students demonstrated a relationship between social and academic belonging and student retention (Stassen, 2003; Tinto et al., 1994).

Educational researchers (MacGregor et al., 2002; Stassen, 2003) observed higher rates of degree completion for students in LCs. Wathington, Pretlow, and Mitchell (2010) noted social
interaction among LC peers seemed to influence students’ attainment of academic goals. Students in traditional class settings reported less focus on relationship development and lower peer-to-peer communication during classes (Wathington et al., 2010). In a survey of doctoral students, Dorn, Papalewis, and Brown (1995) found strong positive correlations between individual students’ persistence-to-degree and commitment to a peer group.

_Intrapersonal Outcomes_

Researchers explored individual learning outcomes related to cohort membership and found support for cognitive and affective gains, as well as increased engagement. Prior to formal research on LCs, Gabelnick et al. (1990) reported assessment results from new LCs at undergraduate institutions across the nation, noting themes related to increased openness to cognitive complexity, integration of ideas, and greater appreciation for diverse perspectives. Students perceived the cohort environment to be supportive and intellectually challenging and reported increased use of peer interaction to attain higher levels of thinking (Leshem, 2007) and to foster self-reflection (Adams, Ryan, & Keating, 2000).

Support for affective learning gains in cohort environments also emerged. Faculty members who compared cohort and non-cohort classes described students within cohorts as more empathic, demonstrating higher sensitivity to the needs and emotions of fellow students. Faculty members observed that cohort classes exhibited greater inclusivity, accepting differences in peers and encouraging peers who appeared to be struggling in class activities (Wathington et al., 2010). Reynolds and Hebert (1998) found statistically significant increases in affective gains within cohorts compared with non-cohort learners.
LC researchers examined students’ institutional and academic engagement as a measure of improvement in the learning environment. Stassen (2003) reported consistent results across multiple studies of LCs indicating higher levels of student engagement in the learning process within LCs, compared with traditional learning environments. Tinto et al. (1994) found that student cohort membership facilitated the development of supportive relationships, which involved increased engagement in academic pursuits through student interaction inside and outside of class meetings.

**Interpersonal Outcomes**

Throughout the history of LC research, results point to interpersonal group dynamics as important to the learning process (Clarke, Miers, Pollard, & Thomas, 2007; MacGregor et al., 2002). Wallace (2005) reported that cohorts developed in patterns similar to other types of groups, noting that cohorts functioning at higher developmental levels served as systems of support and encouragement for members. Leshem (2007) observed that student cohorts demonstrated Tuckman’s (1965) stages of group development as they progressed through their academic programs. As each cohort progressed through its stages of development, Leshem (2007) noted that cohort members developed a collaborative strategy for solving problems and approached learning as a collective endeavor.

Cohort research revealed a role for group climate and cohesion in the learning process. Researchers discovered that personal relationships formed within cohorts promoted a positive classroom climate, an increased sense of safety in the classroom, and increased risk taking (Clarke et al., 2007; Wathington et al., 2010). Wathington et al. (2010) argued that academic structure was necessary, but not sufficient, to facilitate the learning process. Students who
shared academic courses did not automatically benefit from the cohort experience. Rather, student cohorts who developed a supportive climate, characterized by group cohesion, experienced increased peer interaction, interdependence, and increased learning.

Research with student cohorts also revealed the impact of low levels of cohesion on student outcomes (Clarke et al., 2007; Lemna, 2000). Lemna (2000) reported that group conflict combined with low levels of interpersonal awareness resulted in less team building. Although the presence of cohort conflict can be considered a natural experience in the development of the group (Tuckman, 1965), unresolved conflict may lead to lower levels of cohesion and self-disclosure (Clarke et al., 2007).

Integration of Learning Outcomes

LC research demonstrated a relationship between interpersonal and intrapersonal learning. Research on cognitive and affective learning in student cohorts (Leshem, 2007; Wathington et al., 2010; Reynolds & Hebert, 1998) and cohort climate and cohesion (Clarke et al., 2007; Wallace, 2005) suggest an interdependent relationship between student interactions and student learning. Students utilized their cohorts to enhance cognitive complexity (Leshem, 2007) and affective learning (Wathington et al., 2010) through increased peer interaction, support, and intellectual discourse. Students reported that group cohesion, characterized by mutual trust and personal disclosure, facilitated learning of content as well as personal identity development. The relationship between group cohesion and student learning suggests that the experience of cohesion may be necessary to facilitate essential peer interactions that capitalize on the benefits of cohort membership for student learning and growth.
LC literature also highlights relationships between institutional and interpersonal outcomes. Research related to cohort cohesion (Dorn et al., 1995; Gabelnick et al., 1990; Wathington et al., 2010) revealed students in cohesive cohorts develop stronger academic and social connections to the institution. Dorn et al. (1995) reported a strong correlation between cohort cohesiveness and persistence to degree, and students described their cohorts as a contributing factor to degree completion.

Doctoral Learning

A lack of research inquiry into doctoral level LCs severely limits the body of knowledge regarding doctoral education. Doctoral students comprise a unique population within the field of education, distinct from other graduate and undergraduate populations. The nature of doctoral studies requires students to employ a deep approach (Marton, 1981) to learning multifaceted concepts and skills (Lange, Pillay, & Chikoko, 2011). Baker and Lattuca (2010) noted that doctoral studies involve the acquisition of knowledge and the development of a professional identity. In addition, growing doctoral enrollment resulted in an increasingly diverse student population. Students entering doctoral programs represent different ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. Doctoral students are increasingly more likely to be part-time students, possess previous work experiences, and be older than traditional students (Pearson, Evans, & Macauley, 2004).

LCs may serve an important role in doctoral education. Although student retention literature focuses on undergraduate students (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012), doctoral students demonstrate higher attrition rates. Between 30% and 60% of doctoral students across disciplines do not complete their degrees (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Most, 2008; Spaulding & Rockinson-
Martinsuo & Turkulainen (2011) found that peer support played a role in student persistence to degree completion. Within counselor education, Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) found support from peers and faculty was vital to doctoral student persistence.

Due to the complex nature of doctoral studies, students experience a variety of unique challenges. Doctoral programs typically require students to assume multiple roles during the course of their degree (Baker & Lattuca, 2010; Lange et al., 2011; Pearson et al., 2004). Counselor education doctoral students routinely occupy multiple roles simultaneously within their programs, including teacher and student, supervisor and supervisee, and researcher and research assistant (Minor, Pimpleton, Stinchfield, Stevens, & Othman, 2013). Throughout the course of a program, doctoral students may experience difficulty with faculty relationships, academic isolation, and confusion about academic and research skills (Lange et al., 2011). Lange et al. (2012) proposed the use of a cohort to provide the support and challenge needed to address doctoral student needs.

Doctoral learning literature provided initial support for LC models. Cohort relationships may provide academic and emotional support important for doctoral learning (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Jairam and Kahl (2012) discovered both positive and negative social experiences with academic peers. Students reported appreciation for emotional and professional support but also described unpleasant experiences related to competition for program resources (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Doctoral LCs require further scholarly inquiry to confirm initial findings and expand understanding of the social component of doctoral learning in multiple academic fields.
Learning Communities in Counselor Education

Various graduate level counselor education programs across the United States employ LC models for master’s and doctoral students (Schweiger et al., 2012). However, counselor education literature affords little attention to LCs as pedagogical strategies. In the last 15 years, counselor educators gradually began exploring socio-cultural learning theory and the application of LCs in counseling programs (Burnett, 1999; Hayes & Paisley, 2002). Hayes and Paisley (2002) supported the use of student cohorts as a natural context for learning. Interactions between students afford opportunities for intrapersonal and interpersonal learning, as well as peer support (Protivniak & Foss, 2009) critical for the development of counselors-in-training.

Counselor educators reported the use of cohort models for entire degree programs (Osborne, Collison, House, Gray, & Firth, 1998) and specific educational tasks such as dissertation development (Burnett, 1999). Minor et al. (2013) suggested the use of doctoral cohorts to provide peer support to manage multiple roles and program stress. Despite occasional support in the literature for student cohort models in counselor education, there remains an absence of research exploring the learning experiences of graduate counseling students who participate in LCs.

Methods

Given the need for a greater understanding of doctoral counseling students’ experiences of learning in a cohort environment, naturalistic inquiry provided an appropriate means for initial exploration. I employed phenomenography, a qualitative approach designed to focus on student experiences within an educational context (Marton, 1981).
Phenomenography

The research approach termed phenomenography by Ference Marton (1981) seeks to identify the various ways that participants understand or experience a common phenomenon. Phenomenographers utilize comprehensive interview data to discern the qualitatively different perspectives of a phenomenon that exist (Entwistle, 1997). During data analysis, researchers identify categories of description that comprise various distinct concepts expressed by participants (Marton & Pong, 2005). Finally, researchers explore relationships between all categories of description and graphically present them in an “outcome space” (Marton & Pong, p.335). The final product of analysis provides a comprehensive picture of the finite number of ways people experience a common phenomenon (Marton, 1981). Strongly grounded in educational research (Entwistle, 1997), the results of this method can provide educators with a theoretical picture of students’ learning processes that they may then use to inform pedagogy.

Phenomenography involves an interpretive lens characterized by two key elements: a second-order perspective and a non-dual ontology. Instead of exploring a phenomenon directly from an outsider’s perspective, researchers adopt a second-order standpoint by examining the different ways people experience it (Marton, 1981). A typical phenomenographic research question asks how people experience or perceive a certain phenomenon (Booth, 2008). The answer to such a question requires a second-order perspective that attends to the various experiences of participants (Marton, 1981). Researchers begin with a non-dual ontology, viewing subject and object as not separate (Marton, 1981). Rather, they believe personal experience involves an internal relationship between the subject and the object, the person and the world, the experiencer and the experienced (Pang, 2003). In an educational context, the
learner is changed by an encounter with what is learned, and likewise, what is learned is characterized by the way it is understood by the learner.

Through the qualitative approach of phenomenography, I sought to discover students’ conceptions of learning in a cohort over the course of an academic year. Research questions included a) What are the various ways doctoral level counseling students conceptualize and experience learning in a cohort environment?, and b) How do cohort members’ conceptualizations and experiences of learning develop over time during the first year of study? Data collected during in-person interviews provided accounts of experiences from which to identify various ways doctoral students perceive and experience the phenomenon. Student conceptions were organized into distinct categories of description and graphically represented to describe relationships between categories and reveal changes over time.

Participants

Consistent with a phenomenographic approach (Reed, 2006), I utilized a purposive sample of doctoral level students in a CACREP-accredited graduate counseling program in the southwestern United States after receiving approval from the university’s institutional review board. Participants were chosen based on their current experience of membership in a student cohort and their willingness to discuss their experiences. I visited a class session of the identified cohort’s clinical internship course and invited all members of a single cohort to participate in the study. Criteria for participation included admission into the doctoral program in counseling and current enrollment in the first semester of study. All 10 members of the identified cohort indicated their consent to participate in the research project. Participants provided demographic information through an initial survey, presented in Table 1.
Table 1

*Background Information of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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Learning Community Model in the Research Setting

In the identified program, doctoral students join a community of learners from the first day of classes and proceed through a common sequence of courses together over a two-year period. The program requires each doctoral student cohort to participate together in the first 21 semester hours of study and maintain full-time enrollment during the first year (Doctoral Student Handbook, 2012). The program admits one new doctoral cohort at the beginning of each year to
begin studies during the summer semester. After two years of clinical internship responsibilities, students pursue remaining individual academic, teaching, and counseling goals.

Individual faculty members teach each course separately; however, content of curriculum is coordinated to provide a comprehensive learning experience. The program offers a sequence of courses designed to facilitate the acquisition of core competencies in counseling, teaching, supervision, research, and leadership/advocacy (CACREP, 2009; Engels et al., 2010), as well as the development of awareness of self and others through cohort interactions. Each cohort engages in 6 consecutive clinical courses in which they are placed at the same site and participate in the same supervision group.

Person of the Researcher

As a qualitative researcher, I served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Zaharlick, 1992), making my own personal and cultural identity inseparable from each stage of the research project. I am a 45-year-old white male living in the southwestern United States. As a member of dominant gender and ethnic cultures in the United States, I have lived a relatively privileged existence, growing up with an assumed expectation that I would pursue higher education. As a doctoral candidate in a counseling program that utilizes a cohort model, I entered this research study with inherent assumptions and biases regarding the phenomenon of learning in a cohort. I possessed a rich set of experiences pertaining to cohort learning, cohort dynamics, and the impact of cohort membership on academic, clinical, and personal development. I entered this research project with the assumption that the learning environment impacts the learning experiences of students. In addition, research team members also possessed cohort learning experiences as advanced doctoral students in a counselor education program.
Procedures

Participants provided data through an initial demographic survey and three in-depth hour-long individual interviews scheduled throughout the first academic year of study. Interviews occurred approximately at the one month, five month and nine month points of the academic year. All data collected were assigned codes for confidential identification. In keeping with a phenomenographical approach (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000), I structured all interviews minimally to allow participants to express their experiences as fully as possible from their perspectives. An initial list of potential interview questions were used as a guide to provide minimal structure during each round of interviews (Entwistle, 1997). All 30 individual interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Researchers utilized a data analysis process adapted from phenomenography (Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002) and grounded theory traditions (Charmaz, 2006) to create an approach that remained consistent with the phenomenographic goals of the study and incorporated rigorous coding strategies. Researchers analyzed data from each round of interviews separately to allow for longitudinal inquiry. Researchers followed six main stages to analyze participants’ data from each interview round, including familiarization, compilation, preliminary grouping, preliminary comparison, naming categories, and contrastive comparison (Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002). Each of the three researchers conducted initial reviews of transcripts individually (Akerlind, 2005), then the research team met to review, discuss, and reach consensus about analytic codes. Finally, researchers discussed and reached consensus regarding distinct categories of description (Akerlind, 2005), the product of phenomenographic analysis that represents participants’ conceptions of learning in a cohort environment (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998). After all three rounds of analyses were complete; researchers generated a composite list of categories
representing all student conceptions across time and organized them graphically in an outcome space representing relationships between all categories (Marton, 1981).

As a final step in the analysis process, I held a member check meeting with the cohort to present findings and to receive feedback regarding the accuracy of results in comparison with their various perspectives and experiences. The goal of member checking was to ensure that all members perceived themselves to be well represented by the results without expectation of full representation in all categories.

Throughout the analysis stage, I involved two additional research team members to provide triangulation and collaboration for initial coding of transcripts, formation of consensus on codes, and collaboration to create categories and an outcome space. Research team members possessed graduate level training in qualitative research methods and design. The personal experiences of the research team presented inherent challenges for analysis. Collier-Reed, Ingerman, and Bergulund (2009) advocated for a stance of “open understanding” (p.8) in which one’s grasp of the phenomenon is held loosely to allow for a focus on various unique ways of understanding that may or may not relate to one’s own. During the course of data analysis, the research team engaged in reflexive discussion as participant conceptions evoked reactions related to personal experiences and beliefs. Team members utilized reflexive conversations to increase awareness of preconceptions and to maintain analytic focus on participant perspectives.

Results

This section includes categories of description presented in an outcome space (Marton & Pong, 2005) shown in Figure 1 that graphically represents relationships between categories across time. The outcome space includes nine structural aspects of learning in a cohort focused
on by participants across all rounds: dialogue, diversity, knowledge, motivation, support, shared experience, relationship development, interpersonal awareness and conflict. Categories of description within each structure demonstrated hierarchical development over time with latter categories including and expanding upon previous categories. Some structural elements did not emerge during all rounds, suggesting that certain critical aspects were not in participants’ awareness at that time.

Dialogue

Cohort dialogue, as a structural aspect, emerged as important for participants during the second and third rounds of interviews. During the second round, participants’ viewed dialogue to provide enhanced understanding and application of class concepts. Participants reported engaging more intently in reflective exploration of concepts both during and after cohort conversations. Continuation of cohort dialogue in other settings facilitated increased exploration. One member described how conversations continued outside of class:

We all head to the doc lounge afterwards of course. And then somebody just might say, you know, I really like existential theory, and I’ll most likely be like you know well I do too. I never knew this about it, I never knew that about it. I can see how I can pull this from it…. You know just little conversations like that.

In the third round, participants demonstrated awareness of the potential for cohort dialogue to enhance understanding and application, but also to aid integration of learning experiences. Participants viewed cohort conversation as a context to integrate class concepts with personal views and experiences. One member described a learning experience that began in class and continued later with cohort members.

I was able to integrate something you know, an experience with a professor, and with a kind of philosophical portion of it. And then, take my personal portion of it, which you
know I may say, I wasn’t gonna get completely into in that whole big group. But I felt comfortable with those few select cohort members who were sitting there.

Diversity

Categories demonstrated the relevance of diversity for cohort learning throughout all rounds of interviews. During round one, participants’ conception identified diversity as a general source for learning from different perspectives, experiences and resources. Participants reported a process of sharing ideas with each other that provided opportunities to examine personal ideas and beliefs. Participants expected to be exposed to these differences and for that exposure to enhance learning. One member explained, “I think anytime you have multiple perspectives in a group, the group becomes stronger because we see different viewpoints. And hopefully that’ll open our eyes to just different ways of thinking.”

By the second round, participants’ displayed awareness of broadened viewpoints because of member diversity. A member described the process: “Say you share something in our group, and we’re like well I really disagree with that cause I see it from this side. Oh, I can see it from that perspective. I was thinking of it from this perspective.” Participants noted the ability of members to perceive and point out elements of issues not considered before. They reported receiving constructive feedback from members regarding clinical interventions, allowing an expanded array of clinical options to consider. When feedback responses focused on positive messages and acknowledged only the strengths of members’ clinical work, members recognized a missing aspect of the learning experience.

In the final round, participants’ intentionally sought different perspectives from one another to clarify their own views. A member discussed how exposure to different ideas influenced her own perspective.
It’s getting tweaked, you know, hearing other people’s experiences or where they’re coming from in those discussions… It makes me just think about it a little different. Or it might make me say, oh gosh, yeah, I wanna explore that more.

Participants reported knowing which members were more likely to offer differing perspectives on specific topics and initiating conversations with them to foster enhanced learning.

Knowledge

Participant conceptions demonstrated a shift in the value of members as knowledge sources throughout the study. In the first round, participants viewed faculty members as the most valuable and reliable sources of knowledge. The cohort occupied an alternative role due to perceived deficits of knowledge and experience in clinical and academic domains. In the classroom setting, members looked to the professor for information and expert knowledge. Outside of the classroom, members collaborated to share information learned from professors in previous interactions. A member explained, “I think the whole reason we have professors is because they’re there to really facilitate and bring something in that the cohort can’t. If we could do it ourselves, we wouldn’t need the professors.”

During the second round, participants demonstrated a focus on cohort members as valuable sources for learning at an equal level with professors. They saw all members as potential sources for learning based on individual strengths. Likewise, participants viewed themselves as having resources to offer cohort members. Members identified whom to consult for certain clinical populations and whom to seek for advice about general counseling skills. One member explained how different members met different needs.

If I’m personally having a hard day, I know I’m probably gonna talk to [certain members], cause they’re sort of like my comfort people. I know if I need help with
By the third round, participants understood all cohort members to be valuable knowledge sources and individually responsible to contribute to the learning of all. Each member retained responsibility to participate in cohort learning interactions to benefit the learning of all members. Because all members offered distinct elements for cohort learning, the cohort as a whole relied on them to do their part. A member described the role of each member in the learning process.

We all bring some different opinion and perspective to the table and how I see it more as our cohort kind of moving to a place where we are starting to know these unique differences in each of us, and pulling that out of each other more.

Participants explained that they were teaching each other. Members studied together and explained concepts to each other based on their own areas of strength. When someone lacked understanding of a concept, the member who felt more confident served a teaching role.

Motivation

A strain of categories identified motivation as an important aspect of cohort learning. During the first round, participants experienced the cohort as an external motivator to perform academically and clinically. Participants perceived cohort members to be intelligent, competent and highly motivated to learn. They felt some pressure to perform academically and clinically in front of cohort members. One member described the new motivation to produce quality material:

What would normally take me probably about an hour I spent a whole day on just because I wanted to not only bring something that I figured they could know just from reading, right, but I wanted to bring more to the table.

Participants also observed members’ passion about various clinical and research interests and felt inspired by the excitement of others to explore new areas.
Interview rounds 2 and 3 reflected a more complex understanding of the motivating aspects of cohort membership. Participants understood themselves to not only feel externally challenged to achieve at higher levels, but also internally motivated to seek understanding and professional competency. Participants reported that other members’ engagement in the learning process drew them to a deeper level of engagement. They reported going above and beyond academic expectations due to a shared level of commitment to the subject matter. Rather than being focused on completing requirements to achieve a desired grade, members engaged in dialogue and class assignments from an increased motivation to expand their knowledge and abilities. About class participation, a member remarked, “I try to really stay focused in and really feel involved in it, as opposed to just trying to remove myself and get through a class just to get by.”

Support

Categories related to support developed hierarchically as well over time. During the first round of interviews, participants wanted mutual helping interactions with members including emotional and academic support. Participants reported initial experiences of giving and receiving help with members. One member described how mutual helping served to decrease anxiety related to academic and clinical performance.

We were all in freak out mode together. And so we needed to find that stability in each other so one of us didn’t go crashing down… And granted it’s only been a few weeks, but we’ve made bounds of progress in the realm of our mental stability.

Member support roles included collaboration with members in the learning process and provision of emotional and academic support.

At the second round, participants demonstrated awareness of a need to attend to member
relationships as a means of giving and receiving support to enhance learning. A member described the support of cohort relationships: “It’s nice having people along on the journey with me. It dispels a sense of loneliness in the journey because you’re traveling with people.” Relationships provided a context for higher quality learning. Participants reported feeling more open to the learning process as a result of experiencing connections with other members. Participants acknowledged that the cohort provided a support system that was lacking in members’ personal lives. As members experienced less understanding, support, and time together with family and friends, they looked to the cohort to supplement those needs.

Shared Experience

Categories of description highlighted the role of shared experience in cohort learning. During the first round, participants viewed common experiences with each other as a way to cope with the learning environment. There was awareness that others outside of the cohort were unable to understand the nature of the experience. Because of common experiences, cohort members were uniquely able to understand the nature of the entire program experience thus far. In talking about a challenging course load, a member explained, “I’m gonna get it done, and get those twelve hours done, but sometimes it takes me being able to relate to somebody else to say, are we this crazy takin’ all these hours?”

During final interviews, shared experience still aided coping but participants conceptualized the experience more broadly, as being in it together and gained mutual understanding, which provided higher quality learning interactions. Participants reported seeking and receiving support from each other during challenging experiences related to school and their larger lives. Participants indicated that they preferred learning conversations with
cohort members to others. One member explained, “[Faculty member] doesn’t really know that stuff sitting in there. So I was able to then take that piece and bring it into the room with the cohort cause they’ve already been, they know that past.”

Participants also noted disadvantages when different clinical specialties limited understanding. It resulted in having access to fewer members for consultation and fewer opportunities to give and receive feedback. One member explained, “I’m not getting much classmate feedback. No only when I present my cases usually…. Yeah, so I mean I would definitely value people watching my tapes. That just doesn’t happen very often.”

Relationship Development

Relationship development emerged as a structural element throughout the study. Participants indicated relational trust, safety and acceptance influenced the learning process. During the first round, members expressed a need for safety and trust before contributing personal elements in cohort dialogue. When considering participation in cohort dialogue, participants indicated strong awareness of the possibility of being judged or rejected by other members. A member described the risk: “If I put out an opinion, especially a strong opinion like that one in the classroom setting, what are people going to assume about me in supervision, or in those kinds of areas?” Some expressed a need to observe personal sharing by others before feeling safe enough to contribute. One member stated, “I need someone to put it out there before, and maybe we’re all doing that. Maybe we’re all going, oh I’m gonna wait for you to go first.” Participants also expressed a desire for close relationships within the cohort to enhance learning experiences and overall program completion. They expressed a need for more opportunities to get to know cohort members to develop closer connections.
The second round conception highlighted the influence of acceptance upon members’ openness in learning interactions. Perceived acceptance from cohort members facilitated increased openness in cohort learning interactions. Perceived judgment from members led to limited participation. In general, participants noticed increased openness from cohort members during conversations. Cohort members expressed personal reactions, and experiences more often with each other. Participants related their increased openness in cohort dialogue with the levels of safety and acceptance they perceived from members. Participants often remarked that the courage of another member to speak frankly in cohort conversations influenced their own decision to disclose. A member described the incremental process: “People have shared things and not been judged, and so I think that has kind of little by little somebody would share something and nobody judged them.”

Finally, in the third round participants viewed the experience of acceptance to facilitate increased authentic expression in the cohort for enhanced learning encounters. Members offered more authentic contributions and experienced no judgment, which encouraged further expression. One member described the change: “I feel like people talk about things that they might not necessarily have been comfortable with talking about before. Just either in their personal lives, or relationships with faculty, or experiences that they’re having.” Authentic expression included increased participation in dialogue, more personal disclosure, greater honesty in clinical feedback, and more frequent expression of disagreement.

Interpersonal Learning

Categories of description in the second and third rounds highlighted participants’ experiences of interpersonal learning within the cohort. During the second round, participants
identified increased awareness of self and clients through member interactions. Being a part of the cohort inherently provided members opportunities to develop more awareness of how they interacted with each other and the unique roles that members assumed within the cohort. Through cohort feedback, one member became aware of her own discomfort being helped by others.

They were like we’ve noticed that you like to be strong, and be, you know, and when we try to help you and try to acknowledge things, we kind of notice how you are, but you do need to make sure you take care of yourself. So just those reminders, but initially was a kind of uncomfortable piece but only because it’s just like I’m normally the helper.

The third round revealed a new aspect of interpersonal learning centered on members’ professional roles. Participants viewed lessons learned about themselves through cohort relationships as valuable to their work as counselors. A member recounted how a cohort interaction provided interpersonal learning that applied to personal and professional relationships.

I did a lot of exploration of okay where’s that coming from? And I realized that it was probably a lot of my superiority tendencies coming up when I’m talking to this person. And how might that be coming up for me when I’m interacting with faculty or when I’m interacting with clients? And I realized that it was coming up in other areas.

Participants reported that exploration of interactions with cohort members provided awareness of their own relational behavior with clients.

Conflict

Conflict emerged as a critical aspect of learning in a cohort during the second and third rounds of interviews. The first round conception focused on conflict as a negative influence on relational trust and safety with members, resulting in decreased sharing in cohort conversations.
Members experienced conflict as disrupting established levels of relational safety and trust between cohort members. Because of the presence of cohort conflict, participants expressed uncertainty whether safety that had developed between members still existed. A member explained the nature of the uncertainty.

I felt in a good place just with everyone, and feeling that I really let myself just, let down my guard more and just really being more who I am. So, and I feel that that’s really been received well by some people. So I think that’s a little bit of this disappointment too is oh no, you know, things were getting good, and really getting better, and I’m just. So that’s part of the caution, you know. The boat’s being rocked right now.

The third round category, further informed by cohort feedback during the member check meeting, focused on cohort member responsibility for conflict management. Participants recognized cohort conflict as a natural occurrence that could impact relationships and learning interactions positively or negatively depending on how members managed the experiences. A member described a positive outcome when discussing conflict with a member.

I felt sort of challenged, like what, do you think that your opinion’s right and mine’s wrong? And I think she was feeling the same way in a lot of ways…. So we kind of talked it out and I think our conversations went better since then.

When members discussed conflict experiences and reached a level of mutual understanding, then trust between members was strengthened and members experienced closer connections. When conflict went unresolved, members perceived less trust and safety in the cohort and participation in learning conversations was compromised. Expressing concern about unresolved conflict related to competition for faculty resources, a member stated, “I feel bad for those cohort members who didn’t get anywhere near who they were hoping to get, and were just kind of left hanging…. And it’s gonna affect the rest of their time here, all four years.”
Discussion

Analysis of data across three interview points yielded relationships between categories that indicate clear changes in student conceptions over time. Overall, these findings establish further support for the use of LCs in counselor education and offer new additions to the knowledge base that may inform the use of doctoral cohorts in counselor education. In the following discussion, I explore the relevance of results for counselor education, identify implications for practice, discuss the potential for future research, and review limitations of the study to place results in their proper context.

A review of the outcome space reveals a consistent pattern of conceptual development over time. Consistent with variation learning theory (Marton & Booth, 1996), cohort members expressed increasingly complex conceptions of learning in a cohort over time. Over the course of an academic year, cohort members displayed greater awareness of various aspects of learning in a cohort that informed their participation in the learning process. Figure 1 includes a characteristic for each round: expecting, experiencing, and utilizing. Conceptions in the first round reflected a character of expectation with members expressing anticipation and wishes for the roles the cohort will play in their learning experiences. The second round reflected a character of experiencing as members reported more direct experiences of cohort learning. Finally, third round conceptions took on a character of utilization. Members engaged the cohort intentionally to enhance learning.

Implications for Practice

Phenomenographic outcomes provide useful information to inform LC design and pedagogy (Pang, 2003). By attending to students’ various ways of understanding cohort
learning, faculty may design and implement LCs to complement students’ learning needs and maximize the benefits of cohort membership for student learning.

Current results and previous research (Wallace, 2005) suggest cohorts develop in patterns similar to other types of groups (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Categories reflect members’ experiences over time to include increased self-disclosure, openness to feedback and collaboration, as well as experiences of conflict and cohesion. Cohort members perceived the knowledge and perspectives of others to advance their own learning, not unlike any typical group where members collaborate with each other to achieve their goals (Tuckman, 1965; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). These findings deserve attention from counselor educators to inform the design and facilitation of LCs. Creating LCs with cohort development in mind involves issues of community structure and pedagogy.

*Learning Community Structure*

Educators may consult group development theory to inform the sequence of courses. During formative stages of cohort development, members utilized cohort classes to develop relationships and build cohesion. Later, members valued common courses due to the increased safety, trust and acceptance created. Results of the study support the premise that students may benefit from cohort-only courses during initial semesters to foster relationship development (Washington et al., 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Common course work at later stages would allow members to benefit from the foundation of cohort development achieved, facilitating increased engagement and productivity in the learning process (Clark et al., 2007; Gabelnick et al., 1990; Tuckman, 1965). When considering an optimal balance of cohort and non-cohort
courses in a program, educators may elect to employ cohort-only formats when curriculum mastery requires higher levels of personal and professional risk taking or collaborative learning.

Results of the study highlighted the importance of physical space for cohort learning interactions. Members often referenced informal gathering space known as the “doc lounge” to be a critical element for cohort connection, dialogue and collaboration. Time together fostered mutual understanding among members that allowed higher quality learning interactions. Members valued the cohort over others for learning encounters because the cohort understood their unique backgrounds and learning needs, coinciding with previous research indicating cohort environments facilitated intellectual interaction (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Stassen, 2003) and collaborative learning among students (MacGregor et al., 2002). Members viewed the doc lounge as a place to form friendships, build social and academic support networks, and create a sense of belonging (Matthews, Andrews, & Adams, 2011). Study results and LC research suggested that cohort members utilize informal interactions to enhance understanding of concepts (Leshem, 2007) and develop relationships (Wathingon et al., 2010). Current results and cohort literature highlight the crucial role of informal interactions in the learning process, suggesting that the fullest extent of cohort learning may not take place in the classroom. For these reasons, counselor educators may consider providing informal space to facilitate informal cohort interactions.

Results of the study in light of group development theory suggest counselor educators be intentional regarding the role of faculty in LC structure. Group development literature highlighted the importance of trained facilitators to help groups achieve developmental tasks (Clarke et al., 2007; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Faculty may offer useful assistance as a cohort begins its working relationship. During its early stage of formation, cohort members likely

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experience anxiety regarding their place in the group and look for ways to belong by conforming to perceived expectations (Tuckman, 1965). In the current study, members expressed similar anxiety and uncertainty, withholding personal self-disclosure until an environment of trust was established. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) noted that the establishment of a safe environment for member disclosure is essential for further group development. If early risk taking goes unacknowledged or rejected, cohort development may stagnate. Faculty instructors may have a valuable part to play in the establishment of a cohort environment that facilitates early risk taking.

The emergence of conflict is another key juncture in the development of most groups (Tuckman, 1965). Clarke et al. (2007) noted lower self-disclosure in interprofessional cohorts when conflict went unresolved. As member anxiety decreases, members risk honest feedback and encounter conflict. If managed well, conflict experiences may lead to cohesion and increased group productivity (Tuckman, 1965; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Participant conceptions reflected the presence of cohort conflict and its effects on cohort learning. Educators may identify roles for faculty members to facilitate cohort conflict when needed. Clarke et al. (2007) found that cohort conflict, although a natural phenomenon (Tuckmans, 1965), did not resolve in cohorts without expert facilitation. At the end of their first year of study, participant conceptions indicated a continued presence of unresolved conflict, suggesting that further conflict management would be required to reach a more productive developmental level (Tuckman, 1965). Counselor educators have completed training in group facilitation (CACREP, 2009) and may possess expertise needed to assist cohort members to navigate conflict and develop stronger relationships for collaborative learning.
Pedagogy for Cohort Development

Through their assignments and interactions with student cohorts, faculty members may encounter opportunities to facilitate cohort development. Faculty members teaching cohort courses may view their role as co-facilitators of the development of the cohort. Using a cohort development lens, instructors may adjust curriculum and class format to complement the current developmental needs of the cohort, similar to practices of group work educators (Orr & Hulse-Killacky, 2006).

Results of the current study revealed members viewed the task of learning in a cohort differently over time, suggesting changes in their learning needs from early to latter stages of their first year of study. Member conceptions demonstrated increasing awareness of the value of the cohort for learning interactions. Pedagogy through a developmental lens may include an emphasis on relationship development during formative stages of the cohort and employ collaborative learning activities and assignments that facilitate member interaction with increasing amounts of personal and professional risk taking over time, coinciding with the development of cohort climate (Johnson, Burlingame, Olsen, Davies, & Gleave, 2005). Categories indicate members sought trust, safety and acceptance with one another to create a cohesive environment for meaningful learning interactions and mutual support (Wathington et al., 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005.) Differences in clinical specialties created barriers to learning interactions and academic support. Additional elements of cultural diversity, such as ethnicity, gender and age, may also influence learning interactions between cohort members.

Consistent with previous findings (Stassen, 2003; Tinto et al., 1994), members demonstrated increasing efforts to engage the cohort to meet personal and academic needs. Members perceived the cohort as a motivating force for learning engagement. As the cohort
embraced a more active role in the learning process, members expressed appreciation for instructors they perceived as encouraging cohort initiative in class discussions. Members viewed more traditional class formats to limit cohort learning. Marton and Tsui (2004) cautioned educators against adopting a more powerful role in class discourse typical of traditional teaching models, noting that a power differential can limit the collective meaning making process. The authors suggested that less powered students engage less in the learning process.

**Pedagogy in Support of Cohort Learning**

Counselor educators interested in facilitating student growth in cohort classes may view learning as a collective process and facilitate collaborative learning opportunities. Member conceptions of the cohort as a source of diversity reflect humanistic and constructive educational theories with their attention to student efficacy and the co-creation of meaning (Dollarhide & Granello, 2012; McAuliffe, 2011). Throughout the current study, members valued diverse perspectives and experiences of cohort members to gain broadened viewpoints, integrate curriculum with clinical and personal experiences, and clarify their own views. The group provided variation needed for members to learn by gaining awareness of new aspects of the world (Marton & Booth, 1996; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

At the broadest level, members not only saw each other as co-teachers, but as unique individual contributors to the collective learning of the cohort. Tsui (2004) conceived of this collective experience as a “shared space of learning” (p. 170) where meaning is co-constructed by all involved. Student dialogue provides an interchange that creates common ground between participants and meanings are negotiated and clarified (Tsui, 2004). Interactive learning
experiences engage cohort members as cooperative agents in the learning process, encouraging personal responsibility, interaction and reflection between members (McAuliffe, 2011).

According to member conceptions, cohort interactions facilitated interpersonal learning. Counselor educators also support the development of self and other awareness for counselors in training to enhance clinical practice (Hansen, 2009). According to LC researchers, students in a supportive and analytic learning environment are more likely to use self-reflection (Adams et al., 2000) and experience personal development (Stassen, 2003). Counselor educators may seek strategies to include interpersonal learning opportunities to allow students opportunities to apply personal growth to counseling practice (Loewenthal & Snell, 2008).

Implications for Future Research

This study represents an initial inquiry into the nature of cohort learning in counselor education. Results provide only the beginning of a knowledge base to understand the experiences of graduate counseling students in a cohort environment. As Akerlind (2012) notes, all outcome spaces are inherently incomplete. The results provide an initial exploration into the lived worlds of doctoral level counseling students in LCs. Further exploration of cohort learning in counselor education is required to gain a more comprehensive grasp of students’ learning experiences and discover the unique conditions that enhance personal and professional development. Varieties of LC models exist in the field of counselor education (Schweiger et al., 2012). A comparative examination of program models (Stassen, 2003) would illuminate differences in learning outcomes between approaches and identify critical program elements for success in LC implementation in counselor education. Further inquiry into pedagogical approaches and their effects on cohort learning would provide faculty with guidance to
coordinate faculty involvement in LC models and develop best practices for counselor education in cohort environments.

Limitations of the Study

The current study presents various limitations readers must consider when interpreting the results. The main limitations relate to the research design. In spite of the diversity in phenomenography literature regarding the number of participants needed to discern all variations of conceptions, the sample size of the identified cohort for this study may not provide enough diversity to generate saturation in conceptions. To compensate for this potential limitation, I employed a longitudinal design that allowed for greater breadth of information and extended time with participants to ensure that their perspectives were well represented.

The length of the study also limits the level of understanding that can be created from participant data. Although the longitudinal research design allowed researchers to represent students’ experiences across the first year of study, a second year follow up study was not included. Data collection ended before the cohort reached advanced levels of development as noted by the continued presence of unresolved conflict during the third round. Without further study, latter stages of cohort development remain unexplored. Further research will be required to explore the learning experiences of doctoral students after two or more years within a cohort.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, results are not generalizable to settings beyond the research project but rather are subject to evaluation of transferability, or relevance beyond the current project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Readers must judge the credibility and usefulness of the study for their own unique contexts. A comprehensive discussion of the research setting is included to allow discernment about relevance for other educational settings (Lincoln & Guba,
Within the tradition of phenomenography, Akerlind (2012) suggested that results be judged for their “pragmatic validity” (p.123), the extent to which findings provide useful insights into more effective ways of teaching and learning. Ultimately, the relevance of findings are inherently linked to the context of the research project.

Summary

A longitudinal inquiry into doctoral counseling students’ conceptions of learning in a cohort environment provided various perspectives and experiences of the phenomenon over the course of a single academic year. Over the course of the first academic year of study, members developed increasing awareness of the potential learning benefits of cohort interaction and developed more in depth strategies to utilize the cohort to enhance learning. The cohort viewed its development over time in ways similar to other types of groups, marked by increasing engagement, participation, and self-disclosure. The presence of cohort conflict and cohesion highlighted the importance of relationship development for enhancement of cohort learning interactions. Counselor educators may consider redesigning LCs to support cohort development.

Cohort interactions provided a context for integrating academic, clinical and interpersonal learning crucial for counselor education. Educators may design learning communities to take advantage of cohort interactions. The cohort developed a shared space of learning that offered members a diverse world of experiences that created expanded awareness of counseling and counselor education. Because of cohort membership, students developed new ways of understanding their field, the essence of learning (Marton, 1981).
### Table 2

**Outcome Space: Structural and Referential Relationships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structures</th>
<th>Round 1 Expecting</th>
<th>Round 2 Experiencing</th>
<th>Round 3 Utilizing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Cohort dialogue enhances understanding and application of concepts</td>
<td>Cohort dialogue facilitates integration of learning experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Cohort diversity as a source of learning</td>
<td>Members’ different perspectives provide broadened viewpoint</td>
<td>Seeking different perspectives to clarify own views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Professor as primary knowledge source</td>
<td>Members as co-teachers and valuable sources of knowledge</td>
<td>Each member responsible for learning of the cohort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Cohort as external motivator to perform</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cohort creates higher motivation to engage in learning process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Cohort as mutual support system</td>
<td>Member relationships facilitate support needed for learning</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Shared Experience</td>
<td>Sharing common experiences helps members cope</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship Development</td>
<td>Relationship development enhances learning experiences</td>
<td>Levels of acceptance influence openness in cohort interactions</td>
<td>Experience of acceptance facilitates increased authentic expression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Awareness</td>
<td>Cohort interactions provide enhanced understanding of self and clients</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cohort interactions provide enhanced understanding of self as counselor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict decreases trust, safety, sharing</td>
<td>Conflict management impacts quality of learning experiences</td>
</tr>
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**References**


APPENDIX A

EXTENDED LITERATURE REVIEW
This chapter provides a context for understanding the learning experiences of doctoral level counseling students within a cohort environment. The research methodology chosen for the study, phenomenography, offers a theoretical framework for learning, known as variation learning theory that describes intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics in the learning process (Bowden & Marton, 1998). In this review of literature I describe the development of phenomenography, variation theory, and its application for understanding learning in the interpersonal context of a student cohort; explore the current body of knowledge regarding student learning experiences in a cohort environment; and examine the unique context of doctoral level counselor education as it pertains to the learning process.

Phenomenography

The development of phenomenography as a qualitative research method ultimately leads to the development of a theoretical framework for the learning process, variation learning theory (Dahlin, 2007). A review of phenomenography as a research method will highlight its relevance for the current research study and provide a historical context for the emergence of a learning theory relevant to the social environment of a student cohort. Researchers laid the foundations for variation learning theory through the development of phenomenography as a new research methodology in the 1970s (Pang, 2003). The research tradition of phenomenography began with an interest in the content and context of learning (Entwistle, 1997). A research group in the department of education at the University of Goteborg in Sweden initiated a research project with undergraduate students (Marton & Saljo, 1976; Svensson, 1977) to examine potential differences in students’ levels of understanding of written content as well as differences in students’ approaches to learning the content. Although the researchers did not employ purely
phenomenographic methods (Entwistle, 1997), the results initiated a research strand focused on studying the various ways people conceptualize a certain phenomenon (Marton, 1981).

The research approach termed phenomenography by Ference Marton (1981) seeks to identify the various ways that participants understand, experience, or interpret a common phenomenon. Instead of exploring a phenomenon directly, researchers focus on participants’ various perspectives of the phenomenon (Marton, 1981). Phenomenographers utilize comprehensive interview data to discern the qualitatively different perspectives of a phenomenon that exist (Entwistle, 1997). During data analysis, researchers identify categories of description that comprise various distinct concepts expressed by participants (Marton & Pong, 2005). Finally, researchers explore relationships between all categories of description and graphically present them in an “outcome space” (Marton & Pong, p.335). The final product of analysis theoretically provides a comprehensive picture of the finite number of ways people experience a common phenomenon (Marton, 1981). Strongly grounded in educational research (Entwistle, 1997), the results of this research method can provide educators with a theoretical picture of students’ learning processes they may use to inform pedagogy.

Philosophical Orientation

Phenomenographers make human experience the focus of their research (Marton & Booth, 1996), grounding their investigations in the experiences of participants (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998). Researchers begin with a non-dual ontology, viewing subject and object as not separate (Marton, 1981). Rather, they believe personal experience involves an internal relationship between the subject and the object, the person and the world, the experiencer and the experienced (Pang, 2003). Marton and Booth (1996) conceived subject and object as two
extremes of a pole, each influenced by the other. In an educational context, the learner is changed by an encounter with what is learned, and likewise, what is learned is characterized by the way it is understood by the learner.

In order to focus on the variations of human experience, phenomenography involves an intentional orientation toward the unique ways each person understands a common phenomenon (Marton, 1981). Marton (1981) highlighted two different, yet complementary, research perspectives. A first-order viewpoint examines the world from an outside perspective (Richardson, 1999). A second-order perspective focuses on participants’ perceptions of the world. Phenomenographic research adopts a second-order perspective to examine the different ways people experience the world, knowledge that would be unattainable from a first-order perspective (Marton, 1981). A typical phenomenographic research question asks how people experience or perceive a certain phenomenon (Booth, 2008). The answer to such a question requires a second-order perspective that attends to the various understandings of participants (Marton, 1981).

Conceptions represent the various ways of understanding something, the unit of description in phenomenography (Marton & Pong, 2005). Maintaining a non-dual view of experience, Marton (1981) argued that the conceptual and the experiential cannot be isolated from one another. From this perspective, people’s ideas, perceptions, and conceptualizations about the world represent their experiences of it. Although a conceptualization of something is not equal to an experience of it, the two elements provide different features that bring meaning to human experience (Marton & Pong, 2005). Hence, conceptions may include conceptualizations and sensory experiences to describe the various ways people understand the world around them (Marton & Pong, 2005).
Variation Theory of Learning

As the phenomenographic research tradition developed, new theoretical understandings of learning emerged. The variation theory of learning provided a theoretical lens for understanding processes of learning in a social context through students’ own conceptions (Dahlin, 2007; Marton & Tsui, 2004). In a return to its original focus on the process of learning, researchers on the leading edge of phenomenography shifted their focus from descriptive research methodology to a theoretical framework for learning (Pang, 2003). Marton and Pong (2005) noted that phenomenographers moved away from describing variation between peoples’ conceptions of a phenomenon to exploring variation within an individual’s conceptions. Traditionally, phenomenography had treated conceptions as fixed, stable entities, but researchers observed that an individual’s conception of a phenomenon could change over time (Dahlin, 2007; Marton & Pong, 2005).

Realization of the dynamic properties of conceptions opened the door to exploration of the learning process. Proponents of variation theory defined learning as perceiving or experiencing a phenomenon in a new way (Marton & Booth, 1996). From this perspective, researchers could study the learning process by exploring the nature of learning experiences. They attended to structural and referential aspects of the learning process.

Bowden and Marton (1998) described two ways of experiencing a phenomenon, or learning: through its structure and its meaning. The structural aspect of learning includes the collection of critical features of something that one discerns by becoming figural in awareness. The referential aspect involves the meaning assigned to something as a whole (Pang, 2003).
Structure of Awareness

Variation theorists attended to a structure for human awareness to understand the experiences of learning (Pang & Marton, 2004). Researchers (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1996; Runesson, 2006) borrowed from Gestalt psychology, utilizing Kurt Lewin’s (1951) field theory to describe the structure of human awareness (Marton & Booth, 1996). Conceptualizing any phenomenon as a whole, made up of parts (Booth, 2008), one experiences a phenomenon through awareness of its critical aspects (Pang, 2003). Marton and Booth (1996) described the “figure” (p. 539) as aspects of something one becomes aware of in the present moment, and the “ground” (p. 539) as aspects not in current awareness. In addition, a third component to the structure, “margin” (p. 539) represents all other elements in the current environment, such as one’s awareness of time and space, location, and internal reactions that relate to the theme at varying levels.

Consistent with the theory’s non-dual perspective of experience, variation theorists describe the structure of awareness in continual rather than categorical terms (Marton & Booth, 1996). Essentially, one cannot fully experience an object as figure or ground, but rather in different degrees of how figural or grounded, explicit or implicit, it is in immediate awareness. Marton and Booth (1996) described human awareness as a fluid process whereby different aspects become figural as one’s experience with a phenomenon develops. In this way, learning constitutes an ever-evolving process of awareness of the world (Pang, 2003).

Referential Aspect

The referential aspect of learning comprises a second element of learning, according to variation theorists (Bowden & Marton, 1998; Pang, 2003). The structural aspect refers to the
process of learning; how something is learned (Booth, 2008). The referential, or meaning aspect involves the content, or what is learned. Bowden and Marton (1998) highlighted the non-dual, inherent relationship between the two aspects of learning. The structure, one’s awareness of certain aspects of something, inform the meaning that is given. Likewise, the meaning assigned influences what aspects of the phenomenon one brings into awareness. Therefore, learning involves the development of awareness of a phenomenon through certain critical features (Pang, 2003) and the meaning of the phenomenon one identifies.

Process of Learning

Variation learning theorists describe the process of learning, or how one becomes aware of an object’s critical aspects and assigns meaning, through three central concepts: variation, discernment, and simultaneity (Dahlin, 2007). The process of learning begins with variation. In order to gain awareness of something, or distinguish it from the surrounding context, one must first experience variation in it (Marton & Pong, 2005). For instance, the perpetual sound of an air conditioner unit may go unnoticed, until it stops. The variation in sound may bring the object out of ground and into figural focus for a person who is now aware of various states of the air conditioner, on and off.

The second element of the learning process in variation theory involves discernment (Dahlin, 2007). Bowden and Marton (1998) described discernment as the act of distinguishing between various aspects of a phenomenon and focusing on the one most relevant to the present moment. In order to discern any aspect of a phenomenon, one must first experience variation in that aspect. The intertwined relationship between the structure and meaning aspects of learning
(Bowden & Marton, 1998) becomes apparent because the meaning one assigns to an object depends upon which aspects have shown variation to be discerned.

Awareness of variation serves as a necessary condition for discernment to take place (Dahlin, 2007; Pang, 2003). The third element, simultaneity, refers to the need for one to become simultaneously aware of the variation experienced in the aspect of an object along a continuum of other possible differences in order to make comparisons in the environment and make meaning (Dahlin, 2007). For instance, when learning about numbers, one cannot grasp the meaning of the number five without first recognizing that there are numbers that look different than five, the experience of variation. Yet one cannot really develop the meaning of five without becoming aware of its relation to four, six, and other numbers. By simultaneously conceptualizing the possible differences in numbers, one develops a unique meaning for the number five. To summarize the process described in the variation theory of learning, variation leads to discernment, and discernment leads to meaning (Marton & Pong, 2005).

**Variation Theory and the Learning Environment**

The variation theory of learning provided a structure for understanding the learning process from a student’s point of view, but also highlighted the importance of the environment for individual learning (Marton & Tsui, 2004). By attending to the influence of social context for learning, variation theorists opened an important line of inquiry into the interpersonal dynamics of education. At first glance, the variation theory of learning appears to emphasize the internal experience of the learner; however, the theoretical framework recognizes the immense influence of the environment upon the learner. Entwistle (1997) characterized learning as a relational experience, one that involved continuous interaction between the learner, the content,
and the learning environment. Trigwell and Prosser (1996) highlighted the influential role of the teacher in the classroom, arguing that teachers’ conceptions of the learning process inform teaching strategies, which directly affect the classroom environment for students. Recent scholars (Marton & Pong, 2005; Pang & Marton, 2005) focused on improving learning outcomes by utilizing variation theory to provide enhanced teaching strategies. Beyond the teacher’s sphere of influence, Entwistle (1997) acknowledged the impact of cultural context upon the learning experience, noting differences in student approaches to learning between ethnic cultures. To further emphasize the importance of the learning environment, Booth (2008) declared context to be a third aspect of learning, alongside the meaning and process of learning.

If learning develops from the experience of variation, then variation emerges from the learning environment (Bowden & Marton, 1998). Phenomenographers and variation theory proponents (Keiny, 2008; Marton & Tsui, 2004) envision the learning environment as crucial for the learning process. From their perspective, social situations inherently provide needed experiences of variation for conceptual change to occur. Together, a group creates conceptual tension between various perspectives, facilitates interpersonal dialogue, and encourages intrapersonal reflection (Keiny, 2008). Marton and Tsui (2004) posited that all people within a social context contribute to a “shared space of learning” (p. 170), an interaction with others that provides a variation of ideas and beliefs, opportunities to increase awareness of new perspectives, and a process of collaboration in the construction of new meaning. Bowden and Marton (1998) conceptualized this communal field of ideas as “collective consciousness” (p. 189), all of the various ideas and beliefs from each individual connected through intellectual discourse. Only through interaction with others can one encounter awareness of one’s own
perspective (Bowden & Marton, 1998). From a variation theory view, a greater understanding of one’s own belief develops by experiencing contrast with the beliefs of others.

The interpersonal aspect of learning described by variation theory posits several ideas that seem to coincide with psychological theories of group dynamics. Bowden and Marton (1998) discussed the importance of “shared objects of learning” (p. 189), or a common focus on specific interests, as crucial to the life of a learning group. Likewise, group theorists and practitioners (Linton & Hedstrom, 2006; Tuckman, 1965) acknowledged that group members collaborate to establish common purpose to support future therapeutic work. Another point of agreement between the two fields involves communication. Variation theorists (Bowden & Marton, 1998; Marton & Tsui, 2004) emphasized the role of intellectual discourse in the learning process. Marton and Tsui (2004) suggested that meaningful communication between learners creates expanded understanding and facilitates collaborative construction of meaning. Bowden and Marton (1998) suggested that communication about differences and commonalities not only facilitates learning, but helps to develop trust, which may lead to increased risk taking and creative expression of thought. Group theorists (Tuckman, 1965; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) have repeatedly observed increases in group cohesion and productivity as a result of interpersonal conflict that is successfully resolved. Theoretical intersections between variation theory and group development literature highlight the socio-cultural dimension of education, inviting further inquiry into the learning experiences of students within group contexts, such as learning communities.

Learning in a Cohort

Learning communities gained increasing support within higher education during the last
20 years as creative strategies for fostering an interactive learning environment (Gabelnick et al., 1990; MacGregor et al., 2002). Based upon a socio-cultural view of learning (Keiny, 2008; Northedge, 2003), institutions formed intentional communities of learners in various settings, trusting that student interaction enhances learning. Smith (1993) noted that all learning community strategies hold in common an assumption that each student possesses the power to change the learning environment.

During a time when higher education came under national scrutiny (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Stassen, 2003), educators adopted learning community models to address societal concerns about the future of American education such as declining standards of educational outcomes and rising student attrition rates. Above all, educators formed student cohorts to foster greater interaction between student cohort members, and enhance student faculty relationships (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Cohort groups found increasing opportunities for collaborative learning (MacGregor et al., 2002). By focusing on a learning environment that invited greater engagement from students and faculty, reformers hoped to provide more meaningful and fulfilling experiences for all involved.

Beyond increased levels of satisfaction, educators designed learning communities to facilitate a more comprehensive learning experience. By encountering courses that addressed a theme or by studying common issues between professional programs, students gained opportunities to integrate content into a broader context (MacGregor et al., 2002). Educators aimed to increase the clarity of course content for students by providing a broader context for learning through multiple linked courses (MacGregor et al., 2002).

Educators designed learning communities to provide a balance of support and challenge (Smith, 1993). Increased student interaction through collaborative learning activities served to
foster supportive peer relationships as well as a more stimulating discourse. MacGregor et al. (2002) noted that familiarity within cohort learning groups afforded opportunities to encounter and explore the diverse experiences and perspectives of peers.

Learning Community Outcomes

Throughout the development of learning community models in higher education, researchers investigated how cohort environments impact student learning. Overall, results supported theoretical assumptions that underlie the rationale for learning community models. However, researchers have yet to establish consensus for the impact of learning communities upon certain learning outcomes. The current body of knowledge regarding learning community outcomes addresses institutional, intrapersonal and interpersonal learning.

Institutional Outcomes

Researchers (Dorn et al., 1995; Wallace, 2005; Wathington et al., 2010) observed that learning communities are associated with higher levels of retention and student persistence-to-degree. Tinto, Goodsell-Love, and Russo (1994) theorized that students who become involved in the academic and social life of their universities are more likely to remain enrolled. Studies of primarily undergraduate students demonstrated a relationship between social and academic belonging and student retention (Stassen, 2003; Tinto et al., 1994).

Tinto et al. (1994) conducted a mixed-methods study of learning community outcomes including 1190 first year undergraduate students at three universities. Researchers examined students participating in three unique learning community structures, as well as students attending traditional classes. Analysis of institutional enrollment records indicated that learning
community students persisted to the second year of study at higher rates than students in traditional classes (Tinto et al., 1994). In addition, thematic analysis of interviews with learning community students revealed perceptions of the learning community as a supportive peer group involving a high degree of academic and social interaction (Tinto et al., 1994).

Stassen (2003) examined the effect of three different learning community models, as well as a non-learning community environment, on academic performance, retention and social engagement for 805 undergraduate students in a single university. Enrollment data revealed positive outcomes for all three learning community models on retention rates during the first year in comparison with non-learning community students (Stassen, 2003). Stassen (2003) surveyed participants to examine student experiences and found that learning community students reported significantly higher contact with peers related to academic work, providing support for Tinto et al.’s (1994) theory connecting retention and social engagement.

Beyond retention, educational researchers (MacGregor et al., 2002; Stassen, 2003) observed higher rates of degree completion for students in learning communities. Wathington et al. (2010) noted that social interaction among peers seemed to influence students’ attainment of academic goals. Researchers employed a phenomenological inquiry into the experiences of developmental undergraduate students and their instructors at five community college sites, collecting data through individual interviews, focus group interviews, and class observations. The study included students in learning communities and students in traditional enrollment schedules to explore differences in student perceptions (Wathington et al., 2010). Qualitative inquiry revealed a difference in student perceptions between learning community and non-learning community participants. Cohort members reported higher levels of interaction with classmates and expressed more willingness to form close relationships with fellow students,
which they perceived to encourage progress toward degree completion. Students in traditional class settings reported less focus on relationship development and lower peer to peer communication during classes (Wathington et al., 2010). In a survey of doctoral students, Dorn et al. (1995) found strong positive correlations between individual students’ persistence-to-degree and aspects of group cohesion. Researchers collected quantitative and qualitative data regarding cohesiveness and persistence-to-degree from 108 doctoral students in educational leadership programs from eight universities. Correlational analyses indicated a positive relationship between doctoral students’ persistence and experiences of commitment to a peer group (Dorn et al., 1995). Results also revealed a positive correlation between persistence and risk taking interactions. Students who agreed that group members took risks such as expressing opinions also agreed that group membership had a positive effect on degree completion. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses also revealed students’ perceptions of peer groups as a source of needed support and encouragement for degree completion (Dorn et al., 1995). Based on survey results, the researchers suggested that a cohesive group of students is committed to the academic success of all group members. These results support the theoretical assumption that a collaborative group climate likely increases individual students’ motivation to attain academic goals (Beishuizen, 2008).

Intrapersonal Outcomes

Researchers explored individual learning outcomes related to cohort membership and found support for cognitive, affective, and transfer learning experiences, as well as academic outcomes (Leshem, 2007; Reynolds, 1997). Prior to formal research on learning communities, Gabelnick et al. (1990) reported assessment results from new learning community programs at
undergraduate institutions across the nation, noting themes related to a higher quality of learning in cognitive, affective, and transfer domains, including increased openness to cognitive complexity, integration of ideas, and greater appreciation for diverse perspectives. In an early mixed-methods research study of learning communities, Tinto et al. (1994) also discovered student experiences of enhanced academic learning within learning communities. Students participating in clustered and team-taught learning community models reported that peer relationships within their learning communities facilitated enhanced understanding of academic material and increased integration of concepts across classes (Tinto et al., 1994). Leshem’s (2007) qualitative investigation of a doctoral student cohort revealed an interactional process that seemed to support cognitive development. In an ethnographic study of formal and informal student discussions, the author observed collaboration between cohort members to attain higher levels of thought, suggesting that students practiced and developed increased cognitive conceptual skills through peer interaction, which aided academic progress.

Support for affective learning gains in cohort environments emerged in Wathington et al.’s (2010) study of undergraduate student cohorts. During individual and focus group interviews, faculty members who were able to compare cohort and non-cohort classes described students within cohorts as more empathic, demonstrating higher sensitivity to the needs and emotions of fellow students. Faculty members observed that cohort classes exhibited greater inclusivity, accepting differences in peers and encouraging peers who appeared to be struggling in class activities (Wathington et al., 2010).

In a study that compared students from learning communities with students from traditional academic environments, Reynolds (1997) observed higher learning on cognitive, affective, and learning transfer dimensions from cohort members. In a follow-up study,
Reynolds and Hebert (1998) found descriptive gains in all three learning dimensions, as well as academic achievement. Results indicated statistically significant differences in affective learning between cohort and non-cohort learners, but no significant differences in cognitive capabilities or transfer of learning. These results provided support for affective learning for students in cohort models, but raised questions about the impact of cohort learning on cognitive and transfer learning.

Research on students’ academic achievement as an indirect, and therefore less accurate, measurement of learning (Reynolds & Hebert, 1998), contributes to the inconsistency of findings. Reynolds and Hebert (1998) found that cohort learners were more likely to report higher GPA scores than their counterparts in traditional learning environments (Reynolds & Hebert, 1998). Stassen (2003) examined the impact of cohort enrollment upon first semester GPA for undergraduate students and found that cohort membership predicted higher GPA scores. In contrast to these findings, Wallace (2005) conducted a correlational study that investigated the relationship between cohort effectiveness and individual members’ academic grades. The author found no significant correlation between the level of group development and individual academic outcomes, suggesting that the primary benefits of cohort membership may not impact academic achievement. The diverse research findings reveal a lack of consensus regarding the influence of cohort membership on cognitive learning.

**Student Engagement**

Learning community researchers examined students’ institutional and academic engagement as a measure of improvement in the learning environment. Stassen (2003) reported consistent results across multiple studies of learning communities indicating higher levels of
student engagement in the learning process within learning communities, compared with traditional learning environments. In a mixed-methods, multi-site study of student experiences within learning communities, Tinto et al. (1994) found that student cohort membership facilitated the development of supportive relationships which involved increased engagement in academic pursuits through student interaction inside and outside of class meetings.

Conner (2009) observed that the culture of a cohort may also influence students’ levels of engagement in the learning process. As part of a larger mixed methods study of senior high school students’ level of engagement with a writing project, the author initiated qualitative case studies at two participating high schools, utilizing interviews and writing samples for qualitative thematic analysis. Conner (2009) observed that each cohort exhibited differences in group culture. The author defined cohort culture as the values, attitudes, and norms that are adopted, explicitly or implicitly, by group members. Conner (2009) noted that each cohort developed a unique identity, which educators often reinforced through interactions. The author described one cohort as exhibiting a negative “culture of complaint” (p.27), voicing dissatisfaction with teachers and assignments. In contrast, the author identified the other cohort as displaying a positive “culture of commitment” (p. 28), characterized by expressions of appreciation for academic performance and learning (Conner, 2009). Results of the study indicated that a cohort’s climate influenced the academic engagement of each student. Within a negative climate, as identified by the researcher, cohort members engaged minimally in academic tasks provided. Within a positive climate, cohort members expressed motivation to gain knowledge from assignments (Conner, 2009). The author suggested that student leaders and teacher perceptions influenced cohort culture. Within each cohort, participants’ identified leaders in their group who exemplified the attitudes of the group toward assignments, and expressed
awareness of teachers’ perceptions toward the group, both positive and negative (Conner, 2009). Although the study reflects the experiences of a younger population, results suggest the potential for cohort and student-teacher dynamics to impact levels of academic engagement.

**Personal Development**

From a socio-cultural perspective, Baker & Lattuca (2010) described learning and identity development as inherently intertwined elements of the educational process. Academic and professional identity is influenced by self-assessment of learning, as well as the perceptions of others. In a randomized controlled study of 294 first year undergraduate students, Adams, Ryan, and Keating (2000) found that the academic environment influenced social interaction and identity development. Students who reported experiencing a supportive and analytic intellectual environment were more likely to use self-reflection. This finding coincides with Beishuizen’s (2008) assertion that learning communities influence self-regulated learning experiences. Adams et al. (2000) reported a positive correlation between self-reflection and identity formation. Results indicated that students who used self-reflection were more likely to report higher levels of identity formation based upon Erikson’s theory of identity development. A qualitative exploration of students’ perceptions of cohort learning (Arduengo, 2005) also revealed student experiences of identity development in the form of cultivating identity as a scholar and practitioner.

**Interpersonal Outcomes**

Throughout the history of learning community research, results point to interpersonal dynamics as important to the learning process (Clarke, Miers, Pollard, & Thomas, 2007;
Gabelnick et al., 1990; MacGregor et al., 2002). In a quantitative study of cohort group development, Wallace (2005) reported that cohorts developed in patterns similar to other types of groups. The author examined the developmental progress of 17 undergraduate student cohorts using a group development questionnaire. Results indicated that six cohorts exhibited characteristics of trust allowing for more complex group interactions, seven groups displayed a higher level of cooperation and productivity, and four groups exhibited dysfunctional, ineffective interaction patterns. The author noted that cohorts functioning at higher developmental levels served as systems of support and encouragement for members (Wallace, 2005).

Other researchers referenced group development theory to describe dynamics reflected in the functioning of student cohorts (Arduengo, 2005; Dorn et al., 1995; Leshem, 2007). Leshem (2007) conducted an ethnographic exploration of how students in a single doctoral program managed the development of new conceptual frameworks, using participant observation and open-ended questionnaires. The researcher observed that students utilized informal interactions within learning communities to grasp new levels of conceptual understanding. Leshem (2007) also observed that student cohorts demonstrated Tuckman’s (1965) stages of group development as they progressed through their academic programs. Tuckman described four stages of group development. In the Forming stage, members seek anxiously to belong in the group by conforming to perceived expectations. The Storming stage begins when members risk honest sharing, encounter interpersonal conflict, and react emotionally to group demands. In the Norming stage, members move beyond conflict, establish new expectations, and experience closeness as a group. The newfound group identity provides a structure for accomplishment of group goals in the Performing stage. As each cohort progressed through its stages of
development, Leshem (2007) noted that cohort members developed a collaborative strategy for solving problems and approached learning as a collective endeavor.

Group Climate and Cohesion

Johnson, Burlingame, Olsen, Davies, and Gleave (2005) described group climate and cohesion as two strongly related constructs that represent aspects of group dynamics. Group climate refers to a collective perception of the group environment and its impact upon interpersonal exploration. Group cohesion denotes a collective experience of belonging or closeness (Johnson et al., 2005). Wathington et al. (2010) found that cohort membership promoted a positive classroom climate characterized by increased risk taking and peer support within classroom discourse. Cohort members exhibited more willingness to form close relationships with their peers than their non-cohort counterparts. According to study participants, personal relationships formed within cohorts facilitated an increased sense of safety in the classroom, leading to increased risk taking (Wathington et al., 2010). In a qualitative study of inter-professional student cohorts, Clarke et al. (2007) also found that the perceived level of safety within a cohort influenced the nature of class discussions.

Group cohesion also played an important role in the experiences of cohort members, according to several researchers (Arduengo, 2005; Dorn et al., 1995; Wallace, 2005). In a qualitative examination of learning communities in multiples sites, Wathington et al. (2010) argued that academic structure was necessary, but not sufficient, to facilitate the learning process. Students who shared academic courses did not automatically benefit from the cohort experience. The authors explained that the student cohorts who developed a positive group climate, characterized by group cohesion, experienced increased peer interaction,
interdependence, and increased learning. The authors described this type of group as a “communal cohort” (p.226) of students who fostered individual and collective learning through development of a supportive climate, close relationships, high peer interaction, and common goals. Wallace (2005) found that student cohorts who reached a cohesive level of development functioned as a support system for members and enhanced academic progress. These findings highlight the importance of group development in the cohort learning model. In a qualitative investigation of non-traditional graduate students, Brazier (1998) also discovered that cohort relationships provided an added level of support that helped students cope with academic challenges. Wallace’s (2005) study of undergraduate students revealed that cohorts exhibiting higher stages of group development served as support systems for members.

Research with student cohorts also revealed the impact of low levels of cohesion on student outcomes (Arduengo, 2005; Clarke et al., 2007; Lemna, 2000). In a qualitative exploration of the impact of context on student team building, Lemna (2000) reported that group conflict combined with low levels of interpersonal awareness resulted in less team building. In these instances, cohort members interpreted diverse perspectives as personal criticism. A lack of respect between members limited team building (Lemna, 2000). Clarke et al. (2007) also observed a relationship between the perceived level of group safety and the nature of group interactions. The authors noted that students experiencing unresolved conflict reported lower levels of cohesion and self-disclosure. Although the presence of cohort conflict can be considered a natural experience in the development of the group (Tuckman, 1965), unresolved conflict may negatively influence cohort functioning (Clarke et al., 2007). A qualitative study of students, faculty, and staff (Moriarty et al., 2009) revealed that students show higher awareness
of cohort dynamics and their effect on student interactions than faculty and staff, suggesting that instructors lack understanding of student experiences of cohort learning.

Integration of Learning Outcomes

Learning community research demonstrated a relationship between interpersonal and intrapersonal learning. Research results for cognitive and affective learning in student cohorts (Leshem, 2007; Wathington et al., 2010; Reynolds & Hebert, 1998) and student cohort climate and cohesion (Brazier, 1998; Clarke et al., 2007; Wallace, 2005) suggest an interdependent relationship between student interactions and student learning. Students often utilized their cohorts to enhance cognitive complexity (Leshem, 2007) and affective learning (Wathington et al., 2010) through increased peer interaction, peer support, and intellectual discourse. Adams et al. (2000) observed that a supportive learning environment contributed to individual student self-reflection.

Researchers explored the role of group cohesion in learning community models and suggested that cohesion creates increased student interaction, which facilitates learning (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Leshem, 2007). In a qualitative exploration of an online master’s degree program, Arduengo (2005) discovered that the level of cohesion experienced by a cohort related to the learning behavior of its members. Students who expressed commitment to their cohort also experienced closeness with the group. These students noted that group cohesion, characterized by mutual trust and personal disclosure, facilitated learning of content as well as personal identity development. However, students who expressed a commitment to learning in various groups experienced less closeness and sought less direct contact with their respective cohorts (Arduengo, 2005). The relationship between group cohesion and group commitment
suggests that the experience of group cohesion may be necessary to facilitate essential peer interactions that capitalize on the benefits of cohort membership for students’ learning and growth.

Learning community literature also highlights relationships between institutional learning outcomes and the learning environment. Research related to cohort cohesion (Dorn et al., 1995; Gabelnick et al., 1990; Wathington et al., 2010) suggested that students in cohesive cohorts develop stronger academic and social connections to the institution. In a correlational study of 108 doctoral students from multiple universities, Dorn et al. (1995) reported a strong correlation between cohort cohesiveness and persistence to degree, and students described their cohorts as a contributing factor to degree completion. The authors suggested an interdependent relationship between commitment to cohort and commitment to degree completion.

Educational institutions operationalized learning communities through many different models (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Stassen, 2003). Stassen (2003) observed that most learning community research focused on complex models, even though many institutions employ simpler designs that require less financial and human resources. In a quantitative investigation that compared learning outcomes between different learning community models, Stassen (2003) reported that even the simplest models demonstrated positive student outcomes, including student retention, GPA, and positive learning experiences after one year of study. These findings suggest that the outcomes reported in learning community literature may not necessarily rely upon specific pedagogical models.

Doctoral Learning

A lack of research inquiry into doctoral level learning communities severely limits the
body of knowledge regarding doctoral education. Doctoral students comprise a unique population within the field of education, distinct from other graduate and undergraduate populations. The nature of doctoral studies requires students to employ a deep approach (Marton, 1981) to learning multifaceted concepts and skills (Lange et al., 2011). Baker and Lattuca (2010) noted that doctoral studies involve the acquisition of knowledge and the development of a professional identity.

Learning communities may serve an important role in doctoral education. Although student retention literature focuses on undergraduate students (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012), doctoral students demonstrate higher attrition rates. Between 30% and 60% of doctoral students across disciplines do not complete their degrees (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Most, 2008; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). In a survey of 584 doctoral students, Martinsuo and Turkulainen (2011) found that peer support played a role in student persistence to completion, including coursework and research. Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) interviewed 76 participants with earned doctoral degrees who identified cohort encouragement and support to be an important factor for degree completion. Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) undertook initial inquiry into doctoral persistence in counselor education. In a qualitative study of 33 doctoral students representing 17 CACREP accredited counseling programs, participants reported peer relationships as one major factor influencing their decisions to persist or leave. The authors concluded that support from both peers and faculty was vital to student persistence (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005).

Doctoral learning literature provided initial support for learning community models. Flores-Scott & Nerad (2012) suggested the traditional apprenticeship model of doctoral education, with its focus on faculty mentorship, neglects the potential for peer learning. Cohort
relationships may provide academic and emotional support important for doctoral learning (Flores-Scott & Nerad, 2012; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Doctoral student responses to a program evaluation questionnaire (Parker, 2009) provided support for learning community models. Respondents reported advantages to a cohort learning environment, including shared experience, peer discussion and feedback, expanded social networks and exposure to diverse perspectives. Respondents also described potential disadvantages to a cohort environment, including student fears related to lack of confidence and experience, and fear of criticism from peer feedback (Parker, 2009). In a qualitative survey of 31 participants with earned doctoral degrees, Jairam & Kahl (2012) discovered both positive and negative social experiences with academic peers. Students reported appreciation for emotional and professional support, but also described unpleasant experiences related to competition for program resources (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Doctoral learning communities require further scholarly inquiry to confirm initial findings and expand understanding of the social component of doctoral learning.

Due to the complex nature of doctoral studies, students experience a variety of unique challenges. Doctoral programs typically require students to assume multiple roles during the course of their degree, including student, researcher, teacher, supervisee, research assistant, tutor, and even university staff (Baker & Lattuca, 2010; Lange et al., 2011; Pearson, Evans, & Macauley, 2004). Lange et al. (2011) proposed the use of a student cohort to address doctoral student needs. Throughout the course of a program, doctoral students may experience difficulty with faculty relationships, academic isolation, and confusion about academic and research skills. The peer interaction offered by a student cohort may provide the support and challenge needed to address the unique needs of doctoral students (Lange et al., 2011).
Doctoral students in counselor education also encounter multiple roles throughout their coursework and program obligations. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) identified doctoral learning outcomes in several key areas: supervision, teaching, research and scholarship. CACREP standards require students to demonstrate knowledge and skills in each area. In fulfillment of requirements, doctoral students routinely occupy multiple roles simultaneously within their programs, including teacher and student, supervisor and supervisee, and researcher and research assistant (Minor et al., 2013).

Educators acknowledged the growth and changes in the doctoral student population over the last few decades (Baker & Lattuca, 2010; Lange et al., 2011; Pearson et al., 2004). Pearson et al. (2004) explained that growing doctoral enrollment resulted in a much more diverse student population. Students entering doctoral programs represent different ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, doctoral students are increasingly more likely to be part-time students, possess previous work experiences, and be older than traditional students (Pearson et al., 2004). Lange et al. (2011) argued that changes are in order for doctoral education programs to meet the needs of a diverse student population. The adoption of student cohorts may take advantage of the diverse experiences of students through a collaborative learning environment (Lange et al., 2011).

Doctoral programs in counselor education have also experienced drastic demographic changes in student population. Although the counseling field attracts mostly female graduate level students, males have historically served as the majority of counselor educators (Anderson & Rawlins, 1985). In recent years, as the number of women who seek doctoral degrees in counseling increased, so has the number of female counselor educators, leading to fewer males entering the field of counselor education. Recently, Schweiger et al. (2012) reported the average
number of males admitted and graduated yearly from doctoral level counseling programs at a meager 25%.

Learning Communities in Counselor Education

Various graduate level counselor education programs across the United States employ learning community models for masters and doctoral students (Schweiger et al., 2012). However, counselor education literature affords little attention to learning communities as pedagogical strategies. Granello (2000) noted that counselor educators traditionally focused on the content of counseling curriculum without attention to the manner in which it is delivered. In the last 15 years, counselor educators gradually began exploring socio-cultural learning theory and the application of learning communities in counseling programs (Burnett, 1999; Hayes & Paisley, 2002; House & Sears, 2002; Paisley, Bailey, Hayes, McMahon, & Grimmett, 2010; Osborne et al., 1998). Granello (2000) described a contextual approach to teaching that challenges the traditional view of learning as distinct from action. The author asserted that the content of learning cannot be separated from its context, and therefore, all learning is influenced by a myriad of forces in the surrounding world.

School counseling literature addressed the applicability of learning community models for educating competent school counselors. Hayes and Paisley (2002) supported the use of student cohorts as a natural context for learning. Interactions between students afford opportunities for intrapersonal and interpersonal learning critical for the development of counselors-in-training. Paisley et al. (2010) described an intentional sequence of courses, arranged to facilitate cohort development. Perhaps more than other counseling fields, school counselors must learn to collaborate with many different stakeholders in the lives of their
students. Learning communities model the very collaborative skills that will become crucial to competent practice in the field (House & Sears, 2002; Paisley et al., 2010).

Learning communities received some support in the literature for other applications in the field of counselor education. Minor et al. (2013) suggested the use of doctoral cohorts to provide peer support to manage multiple roles and program stress. The author theorized that cohort shared experience would facilitate bonding typical of group development. In a qualitative survey of 141 counselor education doctoral students, Protivniak and Foss (2009) found peer support to be an important part of students’ experiences, especially for learning community students. Osborne et al. (1998) described a process of rebuilding the structure of a counselor education program based upon a foundational philosophy. The authors adopted a student cohort model to complement their core value of social advocacy and to encourage intrapersonal and interpersonal learning through a cohesive group experience throughout the duration of the program (Osborne et al., 1998). Burnett (1999) described the use of a student cohort to provide supervision of doctoral students during the dissertation phase of the program. Faculty designed the model to provide additional support to students who may experience isolation, increase the rate of degree completion, enhance knowledge acquisition, and improve student writing and research skills. According to Osborne et al. (1998), students reported cohort membership to be the most impactful element of their educational experience. Despite occasional support in the literature for student cohort models in counselor education, there remains an absence of research exploring the learning experiences of counseling students who participate in learning communities.

Summary

A review of literature and research in the fields of learning, learning communities, and
counselor education reveals a potential area for further research: the learning experiences of doctoral counseling students in a cohort environment. A qualitative research approach, phenomenography, provides not only a methodological pathway to describe students’ learning experiences from their perspective, but also provides a potential lens for viewing the very process of learning in a social environment (Dahlin, 2007). Variation learning theory employs a socio-cultural perspective of human learning, providing explanation for the decades long emphasis on the impact of the learning environment on student learning outcomes (Stassen, 2003).

Research on learning communities over the last several decades supports positive outcomes for student learning at individual and collective levels (Gabelnick et al., 1990; MacGregor et al., 2002). Research indicates an interdependent relationship between individual acquisition of content and the collective context of the learning environment (Dorn et al., 1995). Research on learning community outcomes supports the belief of variation theorists regarding the non-dual relationship between learner and content, subject and object, content and context (Ornek, 2008; Pang, 2003). Results of multiple studies (Leshem, 2007; Reynolds, 1997; Wathington et al., 2010) indicate that students’ cognitive, affective, and transfer learning outcomes are influenced by and related to experiences with the world around them. Correlational research indicates a positive relationship between social interactions and several learning outcomes, such as retention, persistence to degree completion, and perception of quality learning experiences (Dorn et al., 1995; Wallace, 2005).

A growing body of knowledge supports the notion that learning communities tend to enhance student learning (Gabelnick et al., 1990; MacGregor et al., 2002). The field of counselor education acknowledged the positive results by incorporating various learning
community models for graduate programs in counseling. However, learning community literature and research in the counseling field lags behind current practice (Granello, 2000). Currently, research studies of learning community models in counselor education do not exist, suggesting a need to explore the experiences of graduate counseling students in learning communities. Research in this area may shed light on the unique learning experiences and processes of students who encounter learning in a cohort.
APPENDIX B

DETAILED METHODOLOGY
The purpose of this study was to explore how students in the first year of a doctoral level counseling program experience learning within a cohort, a group of students enrolled in the same academic and clinical courses. Through the qualitative approach of phenomenography, I focused as the researcher on the variations of experience and perception of learning as expressed by participants. Data collected during in-person interviews throughout a single academic year provided participants’ accounts of experiences from which to identify the various ways doctoral students perceive and experience learning in a cohort. Student conceptions of learning in a cohort environment were organized into distinct categories of description and graphically represented to describe relationships between different conceptions of learning.

Research Questions

1. What are the various ways doctoral level counseling students conceptualize and experience learning in a cohort environment?

2. How do cohort members’ conceptualizations and experiences of learning develop over time during the first year of study?

Participants

The study focused on the perceptions and experiences of graduate students during their first year in a doctoral program for counseling that utilizes a learning community model. Following a phenomenographic approach (Reed, 2006), researchers utilized a purposive sample of doctoral level students in a graduate counseling program. Oliver (2006) indicated purposive sampling methods aim to identify participants with the ability and willingness to provide rich data. Participants were chosen based on their current experience of membership in a student
cohort, and their willingness to discuss their experiences. I invited all members of a single doctoral student cohort in a counseling program to participate in the study. Criteria for participation included admission into the doctoral program in counseling and current enrollment in the first semester of study during 2012.

The identified cohort included 10 members. Researchers have used a wide range of sample sizes to explore variations of student conceptions using phenomenography. The issue of sample size involves the question of how many participants are needed to reach saturation of conceptions (Tennant, 2003). Trigwell (2000) suggested 15 may be a preferred size to properly delimit categories of description, noting that less than 10 participants may not reach saturation, while more than 20 interview transcripts may prove to be unmanageable for data analysis. Lucas (2001) interviewed 10 students to investigate approaches to learning in an introductory accounting course. Tripp (1999) found that saturation was reached after 10 participants when studying students’ conceptions of mathematics. The current study included 10 participants, the complete membership of one cohort. Given the longitudinal nature of the study attending to participants’ experiences over the course of one year, I anticipated multiple interviews with each participant to increase the likelihood of reaching saturation of conceptions.

Participants provided demographic information through an initial survey. Complete survey results are presented in Table 1. The cohort included 5 members (50%) between ages 20 through 29, 4 members (40%) between ages 30 through 39, and 1 member (10%) between ages 50 through 59. The cohort included 8 female (80%) and 2 male (20%) members, comparable to gender rates for all doctoral students in the identified counseling program reported at 35 female (73%) and 13 male (27%) students (C. Barrio Minton, personal communication, June 9, 2013).
Current reported demographic data of a broad representation of doctoral level counseling programs (Schweiger et al., 2012) indicated approximately 75% female and 25% male students.

Table A.1

**Background Information of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td>White, Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Status</strong></td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Partnered, Not Married</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children</strong></td>
<td>No Children</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult Children</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Previous LC Experience</strong></td>
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<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participating cohort was comprised of 90% White, Non-Hispanic and 10% Black or African American students, indicating a less diverse ethnic makeup in comparison with all doctoral students in the identified program reported at 72% White, 11% Hispanic, 11% Non-resident Alien, 4% African American, and 2% Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander. In spite of an absence of descriptive research regarding the current ethnic diversity of graduate level counseling students across the nation (Shin, Smith, Goodrich, & LaRosa, 2011), a recent
research sample of counseling students (Welfare & Borders, 2010) reported 81.7% Caucasian, 10% African American, 2.5% Hispanic or Latino, 1.7% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1.7% Asian, .8% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and .8% identified as other.

Learning Community Model in the Research Setting

The study took place within a counseling program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) at a university in the southwest United States. At the time of the study, the university maintained a master’s program with 200 active students, a doctoral program with 54 active students, and 13 full-time faculty members (C. Barrio Minton, personal communication, October 4, 2012).

In the identified program, doctoral students join a community of learners from the first day of classes and proceed through a common sequence of courses together over a two-year period. The program requires each doctoral student cohort to participate together in the first 21 semester hours of study and maintain full-time enrollment during the first year (Doctoral Student Handbook, 2012). The chosen learning community most closely resembles a Learning Clusters model (Gabelnick et al., 1990) in that a single cohort of students encounters a full load of course work each semester. Individual faculty members teach each course separately, however content of curriculum is coordinated to provide students with a comprehensive learning experience. The program offers a sequence of courses designed to facilitate the acquisition of core competencies in counseling theories, teaching, supervision, research, clinical practice (CACREP, 2009; Engels et al., 2010), as well as the development of awareness of self and others through cohort interactions and feedback.
Within the identified doctoral counseling program, a cohort enrolls in one clinical internship course each semester during the two-year period in addition to academic course work. Clinical internship requirements ensure a high degree of daily cohort interaction as students maintain a client caseload, and participate in weekly group and triadic clinical supervision at an on-campus counseling clinic (Doctoral Student Handbook, 2012). The inclusion of clinical and academic requirements reflects a belief of the program faculty that counselor educators must possess strong skills as counselors, researchers, and instructors. Throughout the program, doctoral student cohorts experience ongoing opportunities to reflect upon the relationships between clinical, academic, and teaching experiences and to integrate content with practice.

The identified graduate program admits one new cohort at the beginning of each year to begin studies during the summer semester. After two years of clinical internship responsibilities, students pursue remaining individual academic, teaching, and counseling goals. At this time, cohort interaction decreases as students choose diverse paths toward graduation.

Person of the Researcher

Lincoln (1995) acknowledged the inherent embeddedness of researchers’ social and cultural positionality within the process and outcome of inquiry. The author stressed the importance of disclosing one’s own cultural frame and positions related to the study to provide a context in which to situate research outcomes. As a qualitative researcher, I served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Zaharlick, 1992), making my own personal and cultural identity inseparable from each stage of the research project. I describe my cultural contexts and personal biases hoping that a clearer understanding of me as a person, counselor, and researcher will allow for a more comprehensive evaluation of the process and results of the
study. I am a 44 year old white male living in the southwestern United States. As a member of the dominant gender and ethnic cultures in the United States, I have lived a relatively privileged existence, growing up with an assumed expectation that I would pursue higher education. I completed two master’s degrees and currently am working toward completion of a doctoral degree in counseling. Throughout my educational career, I experienced little, if any, barriers to my goals related to my cultural identity. While my identity still reflects the dominant culture at large, I occupy a minority status among students seeking doctoral degrees in counseling, as males average only 25% of students admitted and graduated yearly from doctoral level counseling programs (Schweiger et al., 2012). My various cultural contexts and resulting worldview inherently influenced interactions with participants as well as my interpretation of the data they provided.

As a doctoral candidate in a counseling program that utilizes a cohort model, I entered this research study with inherent assumptions and biases regarding the phenomenon of learning in a cohort. I developed an interest in the topic of the study as a result of my own membership in a doctoral student cohort. Because of my personal experiences in graduate school, I possessed a rich set of experiences pertaining to cohort learning, cohort dynamics, and the impact of cohort membership on academic, clinical, and personal development. I observed student cohorts in my program at different stages of academic progression and reflected upon the relationship between group climate and the quality of student learning experiences. I entered this research project with the assumption that the learning environment, especially an environment as intensive as a small cohort group, does impact the learning experiences of students.

As a part of my doctoral studies, I chose to pursue a clinical specialty in group counseling. The choice reflected my level of interest in group development and dynamics as
forces for therapeutic and academic growth. Program requirements for specialty designations required me to take three additional courses that address group counseling related topics, two of which have included clinical practice components.

Additionally, I collaborated with two research team members in the analysis phase of the research project. Both research team members entered the project with past experiences and beliefs about graduate level cohorts and the role cohorts play in the learning process. They both possessed master’s degrees in counseling and were in their third year of a doctoral program in the same field. The first member was a 31 year old white female who identified as upper middle socio-economic status. She developed an eagerness to learn more about the experiences of cohorts and how they impact student learning as a result of her personal experiences as a doctoral cohort member. The second research team member was a 42 year old white female who identified as occupying a high socio-economic status. She developed interest in the research project having participated in two separate graduate student cohorts in the fields of medicine and counselor education. She was especially concerned about the impact of long-term cohort relationships on graduate school experience and counselor development.

Procedures

After identifying the focus and design of the research project, I submitted application to the Institutional Review Board of the university where the study would take place. The application included the purpose of the study, research design, participant recruitment strategy, the informed consent notice, data collection and analysis protocol, and strategies to maintain confidentiality of all study participants. In keeping with ethical standards for research on human subjects, the application outlined plans for all researchers to maintain the confidentiality of all
participants involved in the project. All demographic surveys and interview transcripts were assigned a code for identification. No names were attached to surveys or research records. As primary researcher, I created a coding system for participants and utilized it throughout the study so that I was the only person with knowledge of participants’ identifying information related to their data. Participants’ identifying information was maintained in a separate secured location throughout the project. Participant data, in the form of audio recordings and written transcriptions of interviews, were stored on an external hard drive designated for confidential storage of research data. The hard drive was kept in a secured location at all times when not in use. In addition, researchers resolved to maintain confidentiality of participants’ individual information in any publications or presentations regarding this study by de-identifying reference to the university and participants studied. The study commenced after approval was received from the Institutional Review Board.

Participant Recruitment

I began the process of participant recruitment by securing permission to attend a class period with the identified cohort members from the faculty member who taught the course. As primary researcher, I attended the second class session of the identified cohort’s clinical internship course during the summer 2012 semester to meet directly with potential participants, introduce the study, and invite students to participate. I described the focus of the study, clearly explained the level of participation requested of participants, and presented the notice of informed consent to each prospective participant. I emphasized that participation was voluntary and the students’ choices regarding participation in the study would not affect their standing in the program or their grade in any course. All 10 members of the identified cohort indicated their
consent to participate in the research project by reviewing and signing the informed consent document.

Data Collection

Consenting participants provided data through one brief demographic survey and three in-depth interviews. The time invested for each participant was 5 minutes for one demographic survey, and 1 hour for each interview, for three interview sessions, totaling three hours and five minutes. Immediately after the cohort members consented to participate in the study, I invited each of them to complete a brief demographic survey that took no more than 5 minutes to complete. The survey included questions regarding participants’ ages, ethnicities, relationship status, gender, course workload, employment, and previous experience with student cohort models. Survey data was used to provide a comprehensive description of the cohort, providing readers with information to evaluate the transferability of results to settings beyond the bounds of the current project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participant Interviews

I invited consenting cohort members to participate in three in-depth individual interviews during the first academic year of study to explore their experiences of learning in a cohort. I conducted all interviews as primary researcher. The initial interviews took place between June 19 and July 5 during the summer 2012 semester, the second interviews took place between October 11 and November 1 during the fall 2012 semester, and the final interviews took place between February 18 and March 7 during the spring 2013 semester. Throughout the course of the research study I conducted 3 individual interviews with each of the 10 members of the
participating cohort, totaling 30 interviews. I collaborated with all participants to arrange locations for interviews that provided convenience, a comfortable atmosphere, and confidentiality. Most interviews took place in an office space provided by the supervising faculty member for the research project. The office was conveniently located adjacent to the counseling clinic where the cohort members spent a majority of their time on campus. When the space was unavailable, I arranged to interview participants in a private meeting room in the university’s library.

In keeping with a phenomenographical approach (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000), I structured all interviews minimally to allow participants to express their experiences as fully as possible from their perspectives. I provided flexible time structure for all interviews by arranging to meet with participants for approximately one hour for each interview and allowing for departure from time limits when needed to gather sufficient data. Within the broad context of the primary research question, I made every effort to allow participants to guide the direction of discussion. By facilitating expansive discussion of topics from the participants’ points of view, I gathered ample data to support a thick description of student cohort experiences, allowing readers to evaluate confirmability, the extent to which research results are supported by the data received (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Protocol for First Interviews

An initial list of potential interview questions were used as a guide to provide minimal structure to interviews (Entwistle, 1997). I developed additional questions spontaneously in response to participants’ comments throughout interviews. The initial interview questions included:
1. What led you to come to the doctoral program in counseling?
2. Describe your experiences with the cohort group so far.
3. How do you view your own participation in the cohort?
4. What is easy about working with the cohort?
5. What do you find difficult about working with the cohort?
6. How would you describe your learning experiences so far?
7. What role do you expect your cohort group will play in your learning?
8. What are the benefits to you in working with a cohort on academic and clinical areas?
9. What are the disadvantages to you in working with your cohort on academic and clinical areas?
10. How would you describe your relationship with your cohort members?
11. Outside of school related topics what do you talk about with your cohort members?
12. What do you know about your cohort members?

During the first round of interviews, I utilized the first prepared question with all participants to begin the interview, to help participants feel comfortable in the interview setting, and to initiate relationship development with me as an interviewer who was genuinely interested in learning about their experiences and perspectives. I asked the second prepared question with all participants to focus discussion on cohort experiences. I chose to utilize the remaining prepared questions as needed depending on participants’ comments, often asking questions only when they directly related to comments offered by participants. By allowing participant comments to inform further questions, I maintained a minimal interview structure to allow participants to express their unique perspectives and experiences (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). In spite of a minimally structured approach, I utilized between 8 and 12 prepared questions in every
interview. At times, participants provided answers to questions before they were asked, making it unnecessary for me to ask.

Protocol for Second Interviews

I prepared a brief list of potential open-ended interview questions in response to data collected during initial interviews. Because some questions proved difficult for participants to answer during first round interviews due to their limited amount of time in the cohort, I deemed it appropriate to repeat some questions for the second round when participants had gained more time in the cohort and the university program. The list included some questions from the first round of interviews and employed additional questions focused on participants’ learning experiences to maintain a strong focus on the study’s research questions. The list of potential questions provided minimal initial structure for the interviews. I developed additional questions spontaneously in response to participants’ comments throughout interviews to seek greater detail and depth in the areas of interest for the study. Potential interview questions included:

1. What is school like for your right now?
2. Tell me about your experiences with your cohort.
3. How do you view your own participation in the cohort?
4. How would you describe your own learning experiences?
5. How would you describe your learning experiences within your cohort?
6. What role does your cohort play in your learning?
7. What changes, if any, have you noticed within your cohort?
8. How would you describe your relationships with your cohort members?
9. In what settings do you interact with cohort members?
10. Outside of school related topics, what do you talk about with your cohort members?

11. What do you know about your cohort members?

I utilized the first question in all second round interviews to initiate conversation and to once again set participants at ease in the interview setting. I used the remaining questions when needed to focus participant comments on topics related to the research questions. The number of prepared questions used depended on the unique comments of each interviewee. I found that participants addressed most topics of interest through spontaneous dialogue, requiring me to utilize fewer prepared questions than needed in the first round. As before, the phenomenographic prescription for minimally structured interviews guided my process (Entwistle, 1997).

Protocol for Third Interviews

Given the longitudinal aim of the study, the third round of interviews provided opportunity to explore participants’ perspectives and experiences of learning in a cohort at a third point across time. I entered the final interviews with a list of potential interview questions identical to those used in round two for collecting a rich set of data that could be examined for differences across time. I found that most participants entered their third interview with less uncertainty about the process and more intention about what information they wanted to provide. Maintaining a focus on participant perspectives (Entwistle, 1997), I utilized prepared questions less frequently and relied on spontaneous follow up questions throughout the interviews to focus participants on their perspectives and experiences of learning in a cohort. I often utilized the first prepared question from the second round list to initiate discussion, and then responded with
follow up questions related to participants’ comments, allowing participants to express themselves from their unique frames of reference (Entwistle, 1997).

Interview Transcription

All 30 individual interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. I used a digital voice recorder to capture and temporarily store audio from all interviews. Once recorded, audio files were converted to .mp3 format and transferred to an external hard drive for confidential storage. I assigned each audio file a unique code as its file name to maintain participant confidentiality.

As primary researcher, I transcribed all interviews verbatim into Microsoft Word files to allow for textual analysis. I utilized Express Scribe Professional computer software in concert with an AltoEdge USB foot pedal to control playback of audio recordings of interviews, allowing me to ensure accuracy of transcriptions. Transcripts represented all phrases spoken by participants and me, including incomplete phrases and minimal verbalizations. When possible, participants’ nonverbal expressions were included in parentheses, such as moments of laughter, sighs, and tears. Line numbers and page numbers were added to facilitate referencing for later analysis process. Comprehensive transcriptions provided the research team maximum opportunity to gain understanding of participants’ expression (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). Although a time consuming task, the process of transcription provided me extensive exposure to the large amount of data, enhancing my understanding of participants and their experiences (Glesne, 2011).

The transcription process involved measures to protect the identity of participants as well as the identity of fellow cohort members and faculty members they referenced in their
interviews. I assigned a unique code to each cohort member at the beginning of the study and used it throughout data transcription to represent participants without revealing identities. I also assigned a unique code to each faculty member in the identified counseling program to substitute in place of a name on a transcript whenever a participant referenced a faculty member during an interview. By using de-identified codes, I provided participants an additional level of confidentiality regarding their relationships with fellow members and faculty. Once completed, I assigned unique codes to transcription files to maintain confidentiality of participants and stored the files on an external hard drive designated for confidential storage of research data. At the beginning of each first round interview, I presented the de-identification strategy to participants and answered questions regarding the process. The discussion allowed participants to evaluate the level of confidentiality they could expect from the study and to decide what details they felt comfortable disclosing during interviews (Creswell, 2007).

Analysis of Data

Consistent with a phenomenographic approach (Ornek, 2008), transcripts of participant interviews served as the data for analysis. Each of the 3 researchers conducted initial reviews of transcripts individually, then the research team met to review, discuss, and reach consensus about analytic codes. Finally, researchers discussed and reached consensus regarding categories of description, the product of phenomenographic analysis that represents participants’ conceptions of a phenomenon (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998), or in the case of the current study, away of seeing or understanding learning in a cohort environment.

To explore possible changes in conceptions over time, the research team conducted thematic analysis of participants’ transcripts after each round of interviews to identify various
student conceptions of learning in a cohort at each interview time. Researchers identified categories of description for each round of interviews. After all interviews were complete, researchers generated a composite list of categories of description representing all student conceptions across time. Products of data analyses included a list of categories of description for each round of interviews, a comprehensive list of categories of description, and a graphic outcome space representing relationships between all categories (Marton, 1981).

Research Team

As primary researcher, I engaged two additional researchers to participate in the data analysis process. Research team members possessed graduate level training in research methods and design and entered the study with their own personal experiences and interests in learning communities as doctoral students in a counselor education program. The first member possessed a master’s level degree in counseling. She completed a doctoral level course in research methods and design, and a doctoral course in qualitative research in education. The second research team member possessed a master’s level degree in counseling. She completed courses in research design and analysis at the undergraduate, masters, and doctoral levels.

Ornek (2008) asserted the greatest challenge to the credibility of phenomenographic studies involves the relationship between data and categories of description. The author advocated the use of multiple analysts to create increased reliability for the identification of categories. Researcher triangulation also enhanced the trustworthiness of the study by establishing increased credibility that the results represent an accurate interpretation of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
The demands of data analysis required strategic use of research team members to maximize their role in triangulation. The amount of data collected from participants over three rounds of interviews proved to be substantial, totaling over 600 typed pages of text. Trigwell (2000) cautioned researchers regarding the management of large amounts of phenomenographic data. Although the original plan involved all 3 team members engaged in every task of the analysis process, I adjusted the strategy to utilize team members for key elements of the process and to complete time intensive organizational tasks by myself. The research team provided collaboration and triangulation for initial coding of transcripts, formation of consensus on codes, and collaboration to create categories and the final outcome space. As primary researcher, I assumed the additional tasks of organizing researchers’ codes for team review, creating consensus code lists in response to team decisions, and organizing codes into initial groupings for determination of categories by the team.

Analysis Process

The research team utilized a data analysis process adapted from phenomenography (Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002) and grounded theory traditions (Glaser, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). Richardson (1999) noted that the approaches of phenomenography and grounded theory share a common goal for data analysis by attempting to discover emerging concepts from participants’ expressions while bracketing the preconceptions of the researcher. An open coding strategy drawn from a grounded theory approach to text (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) allowed participant conceptions to emerge from interview transcripts. Participants’ answers were broken down into smaller units of meaning, or conceptions, and reconstructed into broader categories of description clearly delimited by participant comments (Entwistle, 1997). Throughout the study, I
maintained journal entries of the analysis process to allow for external evaluation of the dependability, or quality of the methodological approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The analysis process was adapted from Sjostrom and Dahlgren (2002) and Charmaz (2006) to create an approach that remained consistent with the phenomenographic goals of the study and incorporated rigorous coding strategies from a field of grounded theory. The research team followed 6 main stages to analyze participants’ data, including familiarization, compilation, preliminary grouping, preliminary comparison, naming categories, and contrastive comparison (Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002).

During the initial familiarization stage, each research team member read and examined transcripts from a single round of interviews to become acquainted with the material. Upon review of participant data, researchers identified and corrected errors in the text to ensure accurate representation of member comments (Sjostrom and Dahlgren, 2002).

Once acquainted with participant comments, team members progressed to stage 2, compiling significant conceptions from each member in response to the research topic, learning in a cohort environment. First, each team member individually reviewed participant transcripts in Microsoft Word documents and created initial codes using the comments function provided in Word programs. These initial codes represented each research team member’s understanding of participant conceptions. Next, team members submitted their initial codes to me as primary researcher. I compiled team members’ initial codes for each transcript on a Microsoft Excel sheet, placing each researcher’s list of codes in a dedicated column to allow side by side comparison between researchers. I reviewed each excel sheet, identified common codes indicating consensus and added them to a column indicating team consensus, marked distinct codes not shared between researchers for further review by the team, and excluded any codes
unrelated to cohort interactions or experiences, as previously agreed upon by the research team. Next, I submitted the edited documents with initial codes for team member review.

Finally, the research team met to discuss and reach consensus on inclusion or exclusion of the remaining unique codes for each transcript. The team assessed each unique code to determine relevance to the research questions and level of agreement on the concept. If consensus was reached on a code, the team added it to the column of codes indicating consensus. At the end of this stage, the research team had compiled a list of codes by consensus for all participants in a single round. Each code in the list retained identifying numbers to trace its origin.

In the third stage, preliminary grouping, researchers classified all codes from a single round into smaller groupings of similar answers. As primary researcher, I spent the extended amount of time needed to organize codes into initial groupings, then submitted the groupings for review by team members. I utilized Microsoft OneNote, a notebook organizing software program, to move codes into smaller groups with similar ideas. For each initial grouping, I chose a single representative code to place at the top of the list to identify the focus of the grouping. Because Microsoft OneNote allowed for several levels of organization, I arranged initial groupings that seemed to share broader, more general themes on a single page with a title such as “learning,” “differences,” or “support” to facilitate referencing between groupings. When complete, I submitted the OneNote file with initial code groupings to team members for review.

After reviewing the initial code groupings, the research team met to discuss appropriate assignment of codes to groupings, and to utilize groupings to develop preliminary categories. Prior to meeting, each team member created a list of grouping titles that could potentially be
promoted to serve as a larger category. Researchers compared their lists of grouping titles and reached consensus on the codes that may represent categories. At this point, researchers had created a list of preliminary categories of description, or ways of perceiving or experiencing learning in a cohort.

During the fourth stage, preliminary comparison, researchers compared preliminary categories and worked to delimit categories by establishing boundaries between them. Once the research team created preliminary categories, I returned to the initial groupings and reviewed codes that related to a category to establish confirmation for its existence. Using codes within relevant groupings, I identified key aspects of each category to provide further definition. Re-examination of codes initiated a cyclical process involving revision of groupings and categories to more accurately reflect participants’ conceptions. When codes failed to provide full support for an identified category, I reviewed the relevant code groupings to adjust key aspects of the category and created a revised category for team review. When common aspects were noted between categories, I reorganized the groupings under categories and revised preliminary category titles to reflect distinct categories with clear boundaries. I presented revisions to the research team for examination and discussion. After examining revised preliminary categories and their key aspects, the research team discussed each category to identify and reach consensus on its definition.

In the fifth stage of analysis, researchers identified the name for each category to represent its unique character. The research team reviewed and created a name for each category that represented it as a distinct way of perceiving or experiencing learning in a cohort. Researchers chose language to best capture the meaning of all key aspects of the category. Once
each category name was created, the team had identified complete categories of description for a single round of interviews.

After researchers identified categories of description for each of the three rounds of interviews, the sixth and final stage of analysis took place. Researchers employed contrastive comparison, identifying relationships between categories across all rounds and situating them graphically in an outcome space (Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002). The research team reviewed categories from all three rounds at one time and reflected upon patterns that emerged. Once again, the process of review required cyclical re-evaluation of categories at each round to clarify unique differences and understand relationships between categories until the whole system of conceptions stabilized (Ornek, 2008). First, researchers identified categories that seemed to relate to one another and reviewed key aspects of the related categories to determine the nature of the relationship. Once the team reached consensus regarding the relationships between categories, researchers made adjustments in some category titles to ensure representation of both uniqueness of categories and relationships between categories. As primary researcher, I reviewed categories and their related code groupings to confirm relationships identified by the research team. Finally, I graphically arranged categories to represent their relationships with each other within an outcome space.

Trustworthiness Issues Related to Methods

Researchers employed various strategies throughout the course of the study to establish a rigorous approach to inquiry and to demonstrate the value of the final categories and outcome space. Phenomenography is situated within an interpretive paradigm, respecting and attending to variation in human experience (Marton, 1981; Collier-Reed et al., 2009) and requires means for
evaluation consistent with its epistemological orientation (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) established criteria for the evaluation of naturalistic inquiry, departing from traditional concerns about validity in objective terms to consider the concept of trustworthiness as a subjective process of determining a study’s worth to readers and the community at large. Criteria for trustworthiness included credibility, the extent to which results are an accurate interpretation of data; transferability, the relevance of findings beyond the current project; dependability, the quality of the research design and methodology; and confirmability, the extent to which results are supported by data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Collier-Reed et al. (2009) applied the notions of trustworthiness to the phenomenographic tradition, providing more specific guidelines for rigorous inquiry and evaluation. I utilize the authors’ concepts here to describe the efforts taken to strengthen the quality of results. Collier-Reed et al. (2009) identified three types of credibility: content-related credibility, credibility of method and communicative credibility. The first type, “content-related credibility” (p.7), refers to a researcher’s level of understanding about topics related to the object of study. My academic experiences, and those of research team members, provided first person exposure to learning interactions within a doctoral level student cohort in the field of counseling. Through personal encounters with cohort learning, we developed comprehensive awareness of the academic, clinical, professional and personal domains of the phenomenon. Additionally, a comprehensive review of literature regarding learning communities provided a broad grasp of multiple issues related to the subject. Prior experience and exploration of literature provided an advantage in my role as interviewer. Because I possessed expanded awareness of various aspects of cohort
learning, I was more equipped to recognize numerous elements of participants’ experiences and facilitate further exploration. During the initial coding stage of analysis, heightened awareness of broad domains of cohort experiences allowed greater sensitivity to participants’ topical areas of focus, leading to greater density in the coding process.

Experiences that provided enhanced understanding also presented potential challenges to the credibility of data collection and analysis. The personal experiences of the primary researcher presented inherent challenges to the data collection and analysis stages of the research project. Collier-Reed et al. (2009) advocated for a stance of “open understanding” (p.8) where one’s grasp of the phenomenon is held loosely to allow for a focus on various unique ways of understanding that may or may not relate to one’s own. Phenomenography researchers seek to intentionally bracket, or set aside, preconceptions and assumptions about the topic and population of study to focus on the second-order perspective of participants (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998; Collier-Reed et al., 2009; Marton, 1981). Throughout the research project, I engaged in an ongoing reflexive process to generate increased awareness of preconceptions as they arose and to maintain focus on the perspectives of participants. Consistent with a phenomenographic emphasis on awareness, Lincoln (1995) described researcher reflexivity as “the ability to enter an altered state of consciousness, or high quality awareness, for the purpose of understanding with great discrimination subtle differences in the personal and psychological states of others” (p.283). As primary researcher, I practiced reflection to gain greater awareness of my beliefs and experiences, as well as the unique perspectives and experiences of participants. I maintained a journal throughout the study containing memos related to my thoughts about the impact of research design, the subject matter, reactions to interview experiences and analytical theories. Reflexive note taking provided opportunities to become more aware of how my own experiences
were interacting with the research (Glesne, 2011) and to distinguish my conceptions from those of participants.

The research team also engaged in reflexive activities throughout the collaborative analysis process. During the first research team meeting, I engaged members in a reflexive exercise to facilitate discussion of personal experience and its influence in data analysis. Members wrote individual notes describing their beliefs, assumptions and experiences regarding two phenomena: being in a cohort and learning in a cohort. The team presented and discussed their perspectives, noting similarities and differences between each other. Throughout the discussion, members often gained awareness of additional personal beliefs shared by others and added elements to their own entries. The purpose of the activity was to heighten awareness of personal preconceptions about learning in a cohort before reviewing participant transcripts. The research team identified the paradoxical role of personal experience in the current research task, noting both the potential advantage afforded through past experiences in a cohort (Collier-Reed et al., 2009) and the potential challenge to bracket personal conceptions to focus on participant experience (Marton, 1981). During the course of data analysis, the research team engaged in reflexive discussion as participant conceptions evoked reactions related to personal experiences and beliefs. Team members utilized reflexive conversations to increase awareness of personal perspectives, while maintaining analytic focus on participant perspectives.

Ashworth and Lucas (2000) acknowledged the difficult nature of bracketing for any phenomenographic researcher, noting that complete suspension of one’s own perspective is unattainable. The authors suggested the use of empathy to facilitate a shift in orientation to the unique worlds of participants. Through “imaginative engagement with the world that is being described by the student” (p. 299), a researcher adopts an attitude of great interest in unique
perceptions that may differ from others (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). As a trained counselor, I possess a level of clinical experience and skill employing and communicating empathy in personal interactions. Throughout my roles as interviewer and data analyst, I found that my clinical training enhanced by work as researcher. My ability to engage with the distinctive worlds of participants aided the process of bracketing to maximize my focus on the second-order perspective of participants (Marton, 1981).

Collier-Reed et al.’s (2009) second type of credibility, “credibility of method” (p.8), referenced the relationship between the goals and the execution of the study. The goal of the study, similar to any phenomenographic inquiry, was to determine different conceptions and experiences of learning in a specific context, cohort membership. I attended to both the structure and context of interviews (Collier-Reed et al., 2009) to ensure that participants had full opportunity to convey conceptions of learning in a cohort. At the outset of all initial interviews I discussed the purpose of the research project to allow participants to align with the identified focus on learning within a cohort. I explained my interest in understanding their unique experiences and perspectives of learning within the context of their cohort. At times, participants inquired whether certain elements of their experiences were relevant to the study. I acknowledged that my approach involved allowing them to decide what was relevant to express about the topic and that I would ask follow up questions to increase my understanding and to provide further focus on the topic. By discussing the focus of interviews, I aimed to establish a common understanding with participants about our shared purpose (Collier-Reed, 2009) to ensure that the content of interviews reflected the research questions.

Through the use of minimal interview structure, I afforded participants freedom to describe their experiences within their own frames of reference (Entwistle, 1997), rather than
through my own preconceived structures. Interviews often began with discussion of broader experiences that were directly or indirectly related, such as excitement and passion about course subject matter, academic challenges, difficulties managing increased responsibilities, and relational experiences with cohort members and faculty. Through the use of open-ended questions, I inquired about the relationship of participants’ experiences with cohort interactions and with learning experiences within the cohort. In this way, a typical interview often began with discussion of participants’ broader experiences in the university program and life in general, developing toward, and providing context for, their experiences within the cohort, and ultimately their ideas and experiences of learning within the cohort. The absence of a strict list of interview questions afforded participants a measure of autonomy to represent their experiences within their own unique contexts and to offer a richer set of data for analysis (Ornek, 2008).

According to qualitative researchers of various traditions (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Glesne, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), extended engagement with participants is a crucial element of methodology to enhance credibility of research. Creswell and Miller (2000) highlighted the importance of time to establish rapport with participants, increase their level of comfort with the researcher, and facilitate more authentic disclosure. Although the time spent with participants in the study did not approach the original qualitative standards set by anthropologists (Hammersley, 2006), the longitudinal nature of the study allowed for multiple interactions to take place over the course of one year in the context of formal interviews and informal encounters. In addition to the time spent with participants during interviews, I took multiple opportunities throughout the year to interact with participants informally in settings where they typically gathered on campus. These spontaneous moments served not as observational data collection, but rather relational moments to reconnect in between interviews.
and to continue developing relationships with participants whenever possible. In general over time, I experienced participants as having less apprehension, feeling more comfort, and offering fuller self-expression during interviews. This may have been related to relationship development.

Evaluation of credibility of method also relates to the analysis process. Collier-Reed et al. (2009) suggested that phenomenographers must bracket preconceived notions of the phenomenon of study to remain open to what the data reveals. The research design included both researcher triangulation and continual researcher reflexivity to maintain focus on the unique perspectives of participants. By employing 3 different researchers for the analysis process, I utilized a more comprehensive and reflective strategy that strengthened the exploration for an accurate representation of participants’ categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For each round, researchers conducted initial coding of transcripts separately and compared codes during team meetings. In comparing perspectives of the data, researchers encountered points of agreement and disagreement. Team discussion about differences in codes between researchers initiated self-examination of initial interpretations, redirected attention back to participant transcripts for clarification and ultimately facilitated increased awareness of conceptions present in the data.

Another key element contributing to credibility of method involved examination of categories for disconfirming evidence (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Once categories were identified for a given round of interviews, I re-examined all categories by reviewing the related code groupings looking for elements that either confirmed or disconfirmed the category. When disconfirming evidence was found, I re-evaluated the findings, made adjustments to existing categories to more accurately reflect diverse meanings found in the initial codes. The research team reviewed adjusted categories, discussed changes, and collaborated to reach agreement on
final category definitions. The search for disconfirming evidence strengthened the phenomenographic goal to identify and represent various unique conceptions and experiences of learning in a cohort (Marton, 1981).

Collier-Reed et al. (2009) identified “communicative credibility” (p.9) as the extent to which others recognize the accuracy of the interpretive results. As suggested by phenomenographic researchers (Booth, 1992; Kvale, 1996) and researchers across qualitative disciplines (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), a final stage of the data analysis process involved member checking with all research participants. Lincoln (1995) asserted the importance of representing all voices in the community of study and sharing the benefits of research with all involved. I arranged to meet with the entire cohort together for the first time since they were introduced to the study one year prior to review results.

During the member check meeting, I facilitated a focus group style discussion to gather participants’ responses to study results and determine levels of agreement and disagreement. I used Microsoft Powerpoint software to present results of the study. Results included categories of description for each round of interviews with subordinate descriptive aspects to explain their definitions and graphic representation of relationships between categories. I also provided printed copies of the Powerpoint presentation for participants to keep for further review. The presentation included a review of the purpose of the study, an explanation of the form of phenomenographic results to provide orientation, and a discussion about various emotions and reactions that participants may experience due to exposure to results in a group setting (Carlson, 2010).

The purpose of the meeting was to consult with all participants of the study to receive feedback regarding the accuracy of results in comparison with their various perspectives and
experiences. Collier-Reed et al. (2009) questioned the purpose of member checking in phenomenography due to the collective nature of results. Because individuals contribute portions of their experience to a collective group of meaning, participants may be unable to recognize their unique contribution within broad categories. To minimize the risk of participants not recognizing their contributions to results, I explained the collective nature of phenomenographic results to the cohort, noting that categories do not represent any giving individual, but rather the experiences of all cohort members combined. I invited participants to look for representation in different aspects of categories. Because the results aimed to represent various ways of understanding learning in a cohort, I acknowledged the likelihood that an individual would not be represented in all categories. The goal of member checking was to ensure that all members perceived themselves to be well represented by the results without respect for agreement with all categories. Contrary to Collier-Reed et al.’s (2009) concern regarding participant recognition of contributions, all members were able to identify areas of categories, and at times complete categories that represented their experiences. Members also offered suggestions for adjustments to results when specific aspects of categories seemed out of place in comparison with members’ experiences. Member comments are included in the results section for review. The final report of results demonstrates integration and representation of participants’ responses during member checking.

**Dependability**

In considering the trustworthiness of the research project, the criteria of dependability addresses the quality of research design and methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by assessing the level of consistency within the analysis process (Collier-Reed et al., 2009). The research design
included measures related to data collection and analysis to ensure consistency of methods throughout the study. Within the phenomenography tradition, perhaps the foremost concern about data collection involves access to the second-order perspective (Marton, 1981), participants’ ideas and experiences of the world. A phenomenographic interviewer bears responsibility to allow participants to express their ideas by utilizing few prepared questions and employing spontaneous questions to attend closely to participants’ unique experiences (Entwistle, 1997). As interviewer, I achieved that goal by creating a brief list of prepared questions for each round and utilized it sparingly throughout each round.

Because prepared questions were kept to a minimum, I assumed a larger responsibility to avoid the use of leading questions that may presuppose my own perspective on participants. Initial challenges with the interviewer role provided opportunities for reflection about leading responses and allowed me to develop questioning strategies for further interviews. During the first two interviews of the study, I became aware that I was occasionally employing a strategy used by some counselors that involved reflecting, or paraphrasing, a person’s meaning to communicate understanding (Hill, 2009). Such a strategy proved problematic for phenomenographic data collection because of my goal to avoid imposing understanding on participants. During consultation with a faculty advisor about my role as interviewer, I discussed my concerns about leading participants and identified a strategy to employ open-ended questions as a means to evoke further descriptions of participants’ experiences. Through a reflective process, I developed a consistent method by which to facilitate participant expression without imposing external assumptions.

Consistency in the analysis process also contributed to the dependability of research outcomes (Collier-Reed et al., 2009). Because of the use of multiple researchers for analysis, the
research team collaborated to identify a common protocol for initial coding of transcripts. Before beginning formal analysis, the research team met to discuss analysis procedures. I oriented team members to the purpose and basic methods of phenomenography to provide a common understanding of the project. I presented the primary research questions and the team discussed using them as a guide to discern relevance of material during transcript coding. Finally, I provided written instructions to guide coding of all transcripts. I identified a single line of text as the basic unit of analysis. I instructed team members to review each line of text in a transcript and identify any concepts, perceptions, ideas, or experiences that relate to the research questions, and then to move to the next line and repeat the process until the entire transcript had been reviewed. The research team discussed the possibility that any given line of text may include several different codes because more than one concept may be expressed in a single line of text. Likewise, I acknowledged that a line of text may not include any concepts related to the research question and no codes would be created.

After they completed initial coding for the first round of interviews, the research team collaborated to establish boundaries for topics considered to be relevant to the research questions. I intentionally postponed decisions about topical relevance to allow participant data to inform boundaries rather than researchers’ preconceived notions. The research team reached a consensus to include all participant material related to current cohort membership, interaction and learning and to exclude material unrelated to cohort membership, interaction and learning. Researchers included broad criteria for relevance of material to ensure that elements of participants’ conceptions were not excluded.

Throughout the analysis process, the research team employed consistent strategies to reach consensus, contributing further to the dependability of outcomes (Collier-Reed et al.)
The research team utilized two forms of intersubjective agreement identified by Akerlind (2005) and modified by Collier-Reed et al. (2009) for the creation of categories of description from phenomenographic data. Using the first intersubjective agreement strategy, “coder dependability check” (p.10), each research team member independently coded all transcripts from a single round of interviews, then came together to compare interpretations. Use of this method maximized researcher triangulation (Creswell & Miller, 2000) in the initial phase of analysis.

After coding transcripts individually, researchers met together to compare their interpretations. Using a “dialogical dependability check” (p. 10), researchers engaged in collaborative discussion to evaluate the raw data and each researcher’s code interpretations. During a typical research team meeting that focused on identification of initial codes for consensus, one researcher would present a code for the team to review. Team members would refer to the original line in the transcript from where the code originated, then discuss two primary questions regarding the code’s merits: a) Is the concept represented by the code present in the original text?, and b) Is the concept relevant to the research questions? If the team agreed in the affirmative on both issues the code was included in the final list for further analysis. By using these strategies throughout all rounds of data analysis, researchers followed a clear and consistent agreement process.

Ethical Issues Related to Methodology

Confidentiality

The research context presented complex issues related to confidentiality of participant information throughout the research project. The American Counseling Association (ACA)
Code of Ethics (2005) states that researchers bear responsibility to keep confidential all information obtained from participants during the course of inquiry. According to ACA (2005), when a threat to participant confidentiality exists, researchers must discuss the risk and plans for protecting confidentiality as part of informed consent procedures. The academic program in which participants were enrolled presented unique risks of identification for participants. Throughout the study, participants expressed awareness of their confidentiality needs due to the importance of relationships with faculty members and students in the program. Because participants were providing their perceptions and experiences in relation with faculty members and other students in the program, a need existed to ensure that their comments were de-identified to prevent unintended disclosure. Consistent with the ACA Code of Ethics (2005), I addressed confidentiality concerns as part of an ongoing process of informed consent with participants. At the beginning of initial interviews, I acknowledged to all participants that I was asking them to share their honest reactions about their experiences with cohort members, faculty members, and other students in their program. To ensure confidentiality, I presented participants with a plan that involved de-identifying all references to faculty members, fellow cohort members, and other students in the program on interview transcripts and all other analytic documents. I assigned unique numbered codes to each cohort member and each faculty member in the academic program, using codes in place of names on transcripts. I utilized a general worded reference in transcripts when students outside of the identified cohort were referenced, referring to them simple as “student” to avoid identification. Using this strategy, I was the only person aware of personal identities disclosed during interviews. Research team members reviewed de-identified transcripts. All participants agreed and expressed satisfaction with the plan. As uncomfortable topics arose in interviews during the course of the year, some
participants asked for clarification about the de-identification process, and I reiterated the plan. When the cohort met to review results, members discussed their confidentiality needs related to written presentation of results. Through collaboration with cohort members, I identified wording strategies to avoid identification by faculty members and other students.

Issues of confidentiality within the participating cohort provided additional challenges during data analysis and presentation. During the second and third interview rounds, some members expressed concern about being identified within the results by other members of the cohort. In response, I engaged in conversation with participants to understand the nature of their concerns and to begin to identify strategies to address their confidentiality needs related to the cohort. Upon further reflection, I became aware that a higher standard of identification existed among members of the cohort. Typical de-identification methods seemed appropriate when considering the general public. However, cohort members possessed higher quality and more intimate knowledge of one another as a result of their membership in the cohort, creating a larger burden to prevent unwanted identification. Once categories of description were identified for a given round, I reviewed them for potential risk of identification within the cohort. Finally, I contacted participants who had requested additional information and provided feedback about the presence or absence of potentially identifying information in results. Participants expressed appreciation for the information and expressed no need for further de-identification measures prior to the member check meeting with the cohort.

During conversation with participants concerned about confidentiality measures, I explained my plan to utilize short excerpts of participant raw data to serve as examples of categories of description in the written presentation of the study. To ensure confidentiality for participants, I planned to present all excerpts to participants for review before inclusion in the
Reciprocity

Because of the relational context of qualitative inquiry, Lincoln (1995) advocated for attention to the mutuality of interactions between researcher and participant, marked by trust, caring, and openness. With the advent of critical action traditions in qualitative research, increasing attention to reciprocity in researcher-participant relationships emerged (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2011; Maiter, Simich, Jacobson, & Wise, 2008). As researcher, I experienced multiple interactions with participants during formal interviews and during informal conversations outside of interviews when participants sought information, feedback or advice regarding graduate studies and the field of counseling in general. During the first round of interviews, when these opportunities began to emerge, I reflected upon my role as researcher and weighed my responsibility to bracket personal perspectives against my ethical responsibility to engage in an authentic, mutual relationship with participants. I became aware of the time and personal information participants were giving me and concluded that I bore responsibility to reciprocate whenever possible. I chose to offer information and personal experience with participants when requested as long as topics did not relate to my own cohort experiences or my learning experiences as a student. When participants asked for personal information related to cohort and learning experiences, I declined but expressed willingness to discuss the topics after conclusion of the research study.
APPENDIX C

UNABRIDGED RESULTS
Learning in a Cohort Environment

Throughout the course of a single academic year, all 10 members of a doctoral student cohort within a counselor education program participated in 3 consecutive individual interviews. Researchers engaged in exploration of participants’ perceptions and experiences of learning in a cohort environment across participants’ first year of study. Research questions guiding inquiry were as follows: a) What are the various ways doctoral level counseling students conceptualize and experience learning in a cohort environment?; and b) How do cohort members’ conceptualizations and experiences of learning develop over time during the first year of study? Researchers engaged each round of interviews as a discreet pool of data and developed unique categories of description to represent participants’ conceptions at that time, later examining longitudinal relationships and patterns. Categories of description are presented and discussed by round followed by a comprehensive presentation of categories graphically demonstrating their relationships in an outcome space (Marton & Pong, 2005). Titles of categories represent distinct definitions characterized by participants. Category descriptions include subordinate aspects of the broader category with excerpts of participant comments to provide further definition.

Round 1 Interviews

The initial round of interviews reflected unique elements in comparison with later data collection. Participants consistently expressed awareness of the limited time they had been in the cohort and the program as a whole when interviews were conducted. Most participants struggled with responses to many of my questions related to cohort membership, relationships, and learning experiences. Rather than offering definitive descriptions and reactions, many participant responses came in the form of tentative hypotheses, such as expectations and hopes.
for what learning in the cohort would be like in the future. Participants also described current experiences related to their cohort and learning experiences thus far. However, member comments seemed grounded more in philosophical beliefs than personal experiences. In addition, participants and I were beginning to develop rapport during initial interviews. Participants often shared elements of their personal histories to help me understand their experiences in context. Given these characteristics, it was not surprising that the first round of interviews produced the smallest number of categories.

During this semester, all cohort members enrolled in at least two courses: a clinical internship course that involved providing counseling services in a campus clinic, and an academic course on ethical issues in counseling. Some members elected to enroll in additional courses while others did not.

Cohort Diversity as a Source of Learning

Participants expressed awareness of differences between members as both potential and current sources for learning. Comments focused on 3 main sources of diversity: perspectives, experiences, and resources. Participants noticed that members of the cohort possessed different perspectives on various topics related to coursework and clinical practice. Through class dialogue participants reported a process of sharing ideas with each other that enhanced learning by providing opportunities to examine personal ideas and beliefs. Exposure to diverse perspectives related to both clinical and academic areas, consistent with the two courses that participants were enrolled in during the semester.

Professional and personal experience made up another element of diversity expressed by participants. Within the context of their clinical activities, participants reported sharing clinical
experiences gained in various settings prior to joining the cohort. Participants noted value in a kind of vicarious learning experience by hearing another member describe a real life clinical scenario and discuss how it was handled. The value of learning through others’ counseling experiences seemed focused on the acquisition of knowledge and interventions with settings and populations outside of members’ own expertise. Participants conveyed expectation of another form of vicarious learning, through observation of recordings of other members counseling sessions in supervision settings. Due to the early timing of interviews, clinical observation opportunities were limited.

Participants expressed a potential to learn from members’ diverse life experiences as well. There seemed to be an initial awareness of diversity in members’ backgrounds, cultures and developmental life phases. Participants expected to be exposed to these differences and for that exposure to somehow enhance learning. One member explained the experience:

I think anytime you have multiple perspectives in a group, the group becomes stronger because we see different viewpoints. And hopefully that’ll open our eyes to just different ways of thinking, or a different perspective, and just kinda make us more open.

Resources of various types made up another element of diversity in the cohort that enhanced learning experiences. The most current experience involved the sharing of material resources between members. Participants expressed appreciation for the kindness of members who provided written resources related to program requirements, academic assignments, research articles and professional information such as upcoming opportunities to attend conferences and workshops. Members also shared less tangible resources such as strategies for academic success related to assignment preparation. The experience of resource sharing seemed focused around ensuring that all members received resources to ease academic tasks and that no members went without resources that others possessed.
Other aspects of learning through member resources took a more tentative, preliminary form. Participants were working to identify strengths in other members as a means of seeking specialty knowledge when needed. Areas of strength included academic and clinical knowledge, clinical expertise, academic abilities, and professional interests. Members were in the process of figuring out what members to consult for various reasons, but lacked sufficient awareness of member strengths to intentionally seek consultation. Likewise, members reflected on their own strength areas to determine what they might have to offer the cohort. The process as a whole involved figuring out what knowledge, abilities and interests each member brought to the cohort as a whole. A member described the process this way:

I guess it’s one of those things where I could go to anyone in the cohort for any reason for any time, you know, like especially like according to each person’s strength I guess. One person, I know this other person’s specialty area of play therapy. I can go to that person and I know that I can get some accurate information on this or that.

Another resource identified more tentatively was feedback from other members as a source of learning. Participants anticipated receiving clinical feedback from fellow members in the future and expected to gain new clinical knowledge as well as new awareness of personal characteristics that relate to the role of counselor.

A final aspect of cohort diversity as it related to learning involved an expectation of expanded awareness. Participants presumed that exposure to members’ diverse perspectives, experiences and areas of strength would provide broader perspectives, increased self awareness, expanded interests and increased knowledge. This aspect presented as quite anticipatory and was expressed in broad, philosophical terms as the following comment by one member indicates.

I think I’ll experience them as not only fellow people and friends along on the journey, but also as people that will be a great source of knowledge and awareness, and bring my thoughts to different areas that I might not have realized on my own.
**Professor as Primary Knowledge Source**

Participants described expectations for learning as focused on faculty members as the most valuable and reliable sources of knowledge. In the classroom setting, members looked to the professor for information and expert knowledge. Outside of the classroom, members collaborated to share information learned from professors in previous interactions. Participants placed a high value on professor contributions to the learning process as experienced professionals that possessed knowledge and awareness not yet achieved by cohort members. A member explained, “I think the whole reason we have professors is because they’re there to really facilitate and bring something in that the cohort can’t. If we could do it ourselves, we wouldn’t need the professors.” In comparison, cohort members occupied an alternative role for knowledge acquisition due to perceived deficits of knowledge and experience in both clinical and academic domains. Participants experienced some caution seeking and providing information and feedback with each other, perceiving themselves to be new to the university program and limited in their abilities to provide answers. One member described the limited role of the cohort in the learning process so far:

As we gain more experience and more knowledge I really feel like it will have more, a bigger role I guess…. If you’re asking me at this moment, I just don’t feel like the cohort needs to play that big a part of my learning.

**Cohort as External Motivator to Perform**

The experience of cohort membership created increased motivation for members to achieve quality performance in academic and clinical areas of study. Participants perceived cohort members to be intelligent, competent and highly motivated to learn. In response, they reported an increased motivation to achieve and increased engagement in the learning process.
Participants felt some pressure to perform academically and clinically in front of cohort members, but they wanted to perform well. Motivation to be present in class seemed higher than past academic environments. They reported working harder on class assignments to ensure that they were able to benefit the cohort with their results. One member described the new motivation to produce quality material for the cohort:

What would normally take me probably about an hour I spent a whole day on just because I wanted to, not only bring something that I figured they could know just from reading, right, but I wanted to bring more to the table.

Participants expressed a desire to offer something valuable to cohort members with their contributions to the learning process.

Another aspect of the cohort’s motivating function related to an experience of inspiration. Participants observed members’ passion about various clinical and research interests and felt inspired by the excitement of others to explore new areas. One member described an experience of exploring a new therapeutic modality, play therapy, due to the passion of other members:

I had no intentions of doing play before I came, before my first day here. So, it’s interesting to see what’s going to happen, but everyone just loves it so much, I mean there has to be something good about it.

They developed openness to clinical populations outside of their expertise and considered the possibility of developing a new area of practice.

Anticipated time together in the cohort influenced level of engagement in relationships for learning opportunities. Participants often remarked how the cohort would be together for the next several years. A member explained, “Now you know we know we’re gonna be working together for the next couple years, so we have that consideration for each other, and it’s definitely a team thing.” Conclusions related to that awareness focused on increased motivation to seek relationships with members and increased intention to develop lifelong collegial
relationships with members. Overall, participants placed greater value on the cohort for their learning experiences because of the length of time they expected to remain together in the program.

_Cohort as Mutual Support System_

Views of the cohort as a place of mutual support involved both current experience and future anticipation. Participants reported initial experiences of giving and receiving help with members within the learning environment. Something about the experience of mutual helping served to decrease anxiety related to academic and clinical performance. One member described how mutual support reduced anxiety for the cohort.

I think it’s how much in the beginning, how we were all in freak out mode together. And so we needed to find that stability in each other so one of us didn’t go crashing down. Cause we all thought we were going to be the one to kind of not be able to do it. And granted it’s only been a few weeks, but we’ve made bounds of progress in the realm of our mental stability.

Participants also voiced a strong desire for the cohort to play a variety of supportive roles in their program experience as time progressed. Support roles included collaboration with members in the learning process and provision of emotional and academic support. Participants’ need for emotional support in the cohort emerged as wanting member interactions characterized by caring, encouragement and mutual reliance. Academic support needs included the cohort providing assistance when needed on assignments, discussion to stimulate personal reflection, an enjoyable atmosphere for academic work, and self-care advice during times of stress. Normalization also played an important role, allowing members to recognize they were not the only person struggling with clinical responsibilities and academic assignments. As one member
put it, “It is nice having people that you know are in the same position you are. Having the same things due, the same load that you have.”

Sharing Common Experiences Helps Members Cope

Initial interviews revealed participants’ attention to shared experience as a benefit. Participants described various elements of the program that they shared in common only with members of the cohort. There was awareness that others outside of the cohort were unable to understand the nature of the experience. A member compared outside friends with cohort members:

When I gotta friend that just has his nine to five or something and he’s been doing it for a couple of years, he can listen but he doesn’t understand the stress I’m under here, so if I, you know, if I’m talking to someone else in the program and someone who knows what it’s like to listen to someone else’s problems you know for a living? It’s just a bond that we have.

Because of common experiences, cohort members were uniquely able to understand the nature of the entire program experience thus far. Experiences contributing to this phenomenon included common time in the program, shared course schedules, similar academic and clinical challenges through course work, and common reactions to program challenges. In talking about a challenging course load, a member explained, “I’m gonna get it done, and get those twelve hours done, but sometimes it takes me being able to relate to somebody else to say, are we this crazy takin’ all these hours?” Participants noted that experiencing program challenges together and sharing coping reactions with each other created awareness that no member was going through the program alone, and that all members experienced challenges.
**Relationship Development Enhances Learning Experiences**

This conception includes 2 main aspects: the role of safety and trust in cohort learning, and the role of cohort cohesion for learning. Participants conveyed a need to experience both safety and trust in relationships with cohort members in order to feel open to shared learning experiences. Although participants expressed varying levels of safety and trust with cohort members as a whole and with individual members, various themes revealed a lack of these relational characteristics needed for optimal learning. Participants expressed concern about how they were perceived by other members. When considering participation in cohort dialogue inside and outside of class, participants indicated strong awareness of the possibility of being judged or rejected by other members in response to their contribution to dialogue. A member described the risk: “If I put out an opinion, especially a strong opinion like that one in the classroom setting, what are people going to assume about me in supervision, or in those kinds of areas?”

Another element indicating a lack of relational safety and trust with members involved a process of comparing self with other members. Participants noted perceived differences between themselves and other members and often conceptualized the differences as indications of personal deficits in comparison with other members. The comparing process included attention to differences in life experience, academic performance, clinical expertise, classroom participation, and relationship development.

Participants also reported cohort discussion as focused on professional matters, noting an absence of personal expression. Within the context of cohort discussion, many participants described experiences of withholding expression of thoughts, reactions and beliefs due to uncertainty about how their comments would be received. Some expressed fear of taking away
from others’ learning experiences by occupying time during cohort discussion. Others expressed a need to observe personal sharing by other members before feeling safe enough to contribute personal material. One member stated, “I need someone to put it out there before, and maybe we’re all doing that. Maybe we’re all going, oh I’m gonna wait for you to go first.”

Through their reflections on the role of safety and trust for the learning process, participants suggested a clear connection between relationship development and cohort learning. Broadly, the development of trust would allow for an experience of safety, leading to a willingness to participate in cohort dialogue. Participants expressed need for more interactions with cohort members to demonstrate trustworthiness in order to feel safe expressing more personal beliefs and experiences. One example included a need for greater safety for clinical supervision within the cohort. A member explained, “Showing those clinical skills is very vulnerable for me, so I know that once that safety and trust is more established, I feel that I’ll be more open to learning from other people and what they have to offer.” Interactions leading to increased trust included perceiving acceptance from member responses when sharing personal experiences and listening to other members express emotional vulnerability through personal sharing. Essentially, participants perceived themselves to be at an early stage of relationship development and required more evidence of trust and safety before engaging more fully in collaborative learning conversations.

The role of cohesion in cohort learning formed the second main aspect of the cohort’s focus on relationship development. Participants expressed a desire for close relationships within the cohort to enhance learning experiences and overall program completion. Although some described experiences of closeness with certain cohort members, most talk of cohesion took the form of desires and expectations. Comments referenced a desire for cohesion to benefit learning,
but not an absolute requirement. The idea of having close relationships offered an expected advantage for clinical and academic learning. Likewise, the goal of program completion seemed more attainable due to cohort membership. One member remarked, “To me it’s almost necessary to have a cohort, a cohesive cohort that I know I’m gonna be able to get through this program with, academically and clinically.” Participants spoke of the cohort as one group, facing the tasks of learning together in a way that would make the process easier. They attended to the participation of all members, wanting to ensure that all members were included. With limited time together, participants noted the potential for student relationships to develop more quickly due to cohort membership.

Participants expressed a need to establish connections with members. Attention focused on individual relationships as a means to experience greater closeness with the cohort as a whole. Efforts to create connections included seeking similarities with another member such as common life experiences, perspectives, interests, and personality characteristics. Participants noted that social interaction was limited outside of class and wished for more time to engage in social interactions with members to foster a sense of connecting with individual members. The process of making connections with individual members emerged as an important element of cohesion development.

As a part of participants’ desire for closer relationships to enhance learning, they expressed great interest in relationship development in the forms of getting to know members and establishing individual connections. Participants experienced limited opportunities to learn about other members of the cohort. To that point, the classroom served as the primary setting where members got acquainted. Outside of class periods, relationship development was less prevalent. Participants expressed a desire for more time to get to know members as a way of
enhancing learning opportunities. An important aspect of getting to know members involved understanding more about members’ personalities to make meaning out of members’ behavior.

A member described the process:

If I stop someone after class who maybe seems rushed, you know if I know his personality is the type where when he is done with class he kind of just wants to be done; he doesn’t want to hear anything else, I won’t feel like offended or my feelings won’t be hurt because I know that about him. So, kinda helps me know how I’m going to work with other people.

Knowing more about members meant understanding their personalities and behaviors to feel more comfortable interacting with them. This element related to the issue of safety and trust in that greater knowledge about members might aid understanding and potentially reduce concerns about being judged by members. For participants, the need for safety and trust intertwined with the need for close relationships to support learning.

Round 2 Interviews

During the semester when the second round of interviews took place, all participants enrolled in two common courses: a second installment of a clinical internship course that involved providing counseling services in a campus clinic, and an academic course on advanced theories in counseling. A majority of the cohort, including 7 members, enrolled in a course on teaching counselor education. Individual members also chose additional courses related to their unique academic and clinical goals.

At this point during the academic year, participants reported experiencing more challenging schedules in comparison with the summer semester and discussed strategies to cope with the difficult demands of the program. Participants experienced increased workloads from class assignments and program assistantship responsibilities. They recognized the impact
doctoral level study was taking on their lives as a whole, limiting time with family and friends, and increasing time spent at school. As a general theme, participants expressed a desire for greater balance in their lives, looking for ways to manage school time more efficiently to allow more time and energy for relationships and activities outside of school.

Cohort Dialogue Enhances Understanding and Application of Concepts

Participants demonstrated awareness of several roles cohort dialogue played in their learning process. Cohort discussion inside and outside of class provided enhanced understanding and application of concepts originating from the curriculum. Participants reported engaging more intently in reflective exploration of concepts both during and after cohort dialogue. Exchange of ideas related to a concept initiated further exploration. Continuation of cohort dialogue from class to other settings facilitated increased exploration. Participants described a process whereby a professor introduced a topic, cohort members discussed related concepts during class, and then informally continued conversations with members in various settings including other classes and common gathering places. By continuing learning conversations in different settings throughout the week, members developed increased understanding of the concepts introduced in class.

One setting, termed the “doc lounge” by cohort members, served an important role in cohort dialogue. Participants described the doc lounge as the primary gathering place for the cohort between classes and counseling responsibilities. The room was located in the building where the cohort spent a majority of their time providing counseling services and attending classes. Participants described a typical routine of leaving class and walking to the doc lounge
where conversations from class would continue. One member described how class conversations continued in the doc lounge:

We all head to the doc lounge afterwards of course. And then somebody just might say, you know, I really like existential theory, and I’ll most likely be like you know well I do too. I never knew this about it, I never knew that about it. I can see how I can pull this from it…. You know just little conversations like that.”

There was an element of class conversations spontaneously expanding into the doc lounge in a way that engendered more exploration of concepts. Participants described using the doc lounge to debrief academic and clinical learning experiences with each other.

The nature of learning conversations in the doc lounge provided opportunities for increased understanding and application of concepts. Participants described a shift to a richer encounter as members incorporated more personal experiences with class concepts. One member reported sharing more personally outside of class.

In class I may not share a personal experience to tie into something we talked about, but once I got to the doc lounge I probably would. Because I’ve had time to kind of think about what happened in class and it brings up that kind of point.

Members shared personal experiences related to class topics in more informal doc lounge setting allowing increased understanding. Participants also reported referencing and applying class concepts in conversation with each other on an ongoing basis in ways that provided a stronger grasp of the material and its relevance in practice.

**Members’ Different Perspectives Provide Broadened Viewpoint**

Participants consistently reported gaining broadened understandings of class concepts and clinical practice as a result of exposure to members’ diverse perspectives. The diverse perspectives and experiences of members provided enhanced awareness of various aspects related to class concepts. A member described the process:
Say you share something in our group, and we’re like well I really disagree with that cause I see it from this side. Oh yeah, I can see it from that perspective. I was thinking of it from this perspective. And so you’re seeing a lot of different discussion over kind of the topics that are being brought up.

Participants noted the ability of members to perceive and point out elements of issues not considered before.

Participants identified member feedback as a new setting where different perspectives provided increased awareness. Members routinely showed recorded segments of their counseling sessions as part of required supervision procedures in the clinical internship course. Members reviewed recordings with a supervisor or faculty member and cohort peers to receive supervisory support and feedback regarding clinical skills. Group supervision sessions involved the entire cohort for conversation and feedback. Triadic sessions included two cohort members with one supervisor. Participants valued receiving clinical perspectives from cohort members because the process generated new awareness and understanding of client behaviors during sessions. Members recognized elements of counseling sessions previously unnoticed, providing expanded awareness of the interaction between client and counselor. In a similar fashion, participants described receiving feedback about teaching skills and gaining new insight about the teaching role and new confidence about teaching abilities as a result.

Participants reported receiving constructive feedback from members regarding clinical interventions, allowing an expanded array of clinical options to consider. Conversely, they recognized limited learning opportunities when constructive clinical feedback was absent. As one member explained, “I like it when someone’s willing to criticize me I guess. And a constructive criticism, cause sometimes it seems like maybe we haven’t gotten comfortable with each other enough to do that as much as I’d like to hear.” When feedback responses focused on
positive messages and acknowledged only the strengths of members’ clinical work, members recognized a missing aspect of the learning experience.

Diverse member perspectives also played a clarifying role in the learning process. Participants described a process whereby exposure to members’ different perspectives facilitated a clearer identification of one’s own ideas. Hearing members describe and explain perspectives related to academic and clinical concepts provided opportunities to explore personal perspectives more closely and to accept or reject new ideas gained from other members. Participants expressed having greater clarity and certainty about their own beliefs as a result of reflective interactions with the ideas of other members.

Members as Co-Teachers and Valuable Sources of Knowledge

In contrast to the previous round of interviews, participants demonstrated a focus on cohort members as valuable sources for learning at an equal level with professors. They saw all members as potential sources for learning based on individual strengths and they described a process of figuring out who could be consulted for specific learning needs. Likewise, participants viewed themselves as having resources to offer cohort members. They identified their own specific areas of interest and personal characteristics that held potential to benefit other members. A member noted, “I like to have things done way ahead of time. So, you know I’ll say, I’m already done with this, so if you need any help or if you have any questions you can call me.”

Participants sought out members as sources of academic, clinical, and teaching knowledge. Members offered and received academic assistance in the form of knowledge in domain specific areas and advice related to class assignments. Regarding clinical knowledge,
members served consultation roles related to their areas of expertise. Members identified whom to consult for certain clinical populations and whom to seek for advice about general counseling skills. One member explained how different members met different needs.

If I’m personally having a hard day, I know I’m probably gonna talk to [certain members], cause they’re sort of like my comfort people. I know if I need help with something, I’m probably gonna go to [different members] cause they have a lot of knowledge on different things.

Another way of seeking clinical knowledge came in the form of client conceptualization conversations. Participants reported seeking members in order to present ideas about a client and to engage in reflective conversation to enhance understanding of client needs. In this way, knowledge was more collaboratively created. Participants also sought consultation from members about their teaching practice.

Beyond merely viewing members as knowledge sources, participants described a role of all members as co-teachers in the learning process. There was an appreciation for what members contributed to the cohort’s collective learning experiences and an awareness that members relied upon each other for learning.

*Cohort Creates Higher Motivation to Engage in Learning Process*

Participants understood the cohort environment as a motivating factor for participation in the learning process. They experienced increased engagement in learning conversations, expanded interest in learning, and more frequent presence at school because of cohort relationships. Participants reported a higher motivation to engage in class activities and participate in class dialogue due to cohort membership. One member reported feeling more interested in class topics because of cohort interactions.
They got so excited, and I got so pulled into the conversation I ended up at the end of the class going, this is really cool. I’m really kind of interested in this. And so it’s really in some ways lit a fire in me, in something that even I was not thinking I would enjoy.

Members placed a high value on cohort class time and sought to remain focused on interactions to maximize their learning experiences. Participants reported that other members’ engagement in the learning process drew them to a deeper level of engagement.

Cohort members perceived course format to influence the nature of their interactions. They viewed most of their courses as structured to facilitate cohort discussion rather than traditional lecture from instructors. Participants reported experiencing more in-depth exploration during discussion oriented class periods because the cohort took more initiative to guide their own learning process.

Participants reported experiencing greater interest and commitment to learning than previously held in traditional learning environments. According to reports, external motivation from cohort interactions facilitated greater intrinsic motivation to pursue learning. Rather than being focused on completing requirements to achieve a desired grade, members engaged in dialogue and class assignments from an increased motivation to expand their knowledge and abilities. About class participation, a member remarked, “I try to really stay focused in and really feel involved in it, as opposed to just trying to remove myself and get through a class just to get by.” Participants reported going above and beyond academic expectations due to a shared level of commitment to the subject matter. Members worked harder on class assignments than in previous environments.

Participants reported feeling more interested in exploring and absorbing academic material because of cohort discussions. Something about learning conversations within the cohort influenced a stronger internal urge to engage in the learning process. Member comments
during cohort dialogue created interest and excitement in others to respond. Participants reported feeling passionate about their interests and being influenced by the passion expressed by others in class discussions. Participants viewed class time as more valuable than simple information transfer and memorization. It was an interactive, collective search for knowledge.

Cohort relationships influenced greater presence at school. Participants noticed that they made intentional choices to be present in the doc lounge at times when school attendance was not required. Members experienced increased motivation to be present in the learning environment due to cohort relationship interactions.

*Member Relationships Facilitate Support Needed for Learning*

Participants described connections between relationship development, academic and emotional support, and the learning process. Cohort relationships played an important role in member learning. A more collective view of learning emerged. Members described the cohort as meeting learning tasks together as one group and moving toward program completion together. A member described the support of cohort relationships this way: “It’s nice having people along on the journey with me. It dispels a sense of loneliness in the journey because you’re traveling with people.”

Participants identified member relationships as a needed element for optimal learning to take place within the cohort environment. Relationships provided a context for higher quality learning. Social interactions between members influenced learning interactions in class. One member expressed a wish for more cohort interaction outside of school to enhance cohort learning: “I think it just kind of limits it. I don’t know. I just think if we were interacting more outside of that invisible wall, that it would kind of expand the depth of our interaction.”
Participants perceived that as the cohort spent more informal social time together developing relationships with one another, their interactions in the classroom became enriched and generated more meaning. Participants reported feeling more open to the learning process as a result of experiencing connections with other members. When connections with members were perceived, members participated more openly in cohort classes and experienced a stronger engagement with class material.

Emotional support within the cohort also played a role in the learning process. Participants described the cohort as an emotional support system that aided coping with the learning process. Cohort members were the only ones able to understand the challenges of the program environment and served as an important source of understanding for members. Participants reported emotional support within the cohort in the forms of empathic understanding, validation of member reactions, and advocacy on behalf of members’ needs.

During this time, participants acknowledged that the cohort provided a support system that was lacking in members’ personal lives. As members experienced less understanding, support, and time together with family and friends, they looked to the cohort to supplement those needs. Participants noticed, however, that the emotional support system of the cohort lessened outside of school settings. While at school, members gave and received emotional support to one another, but outside the confines of the school building supportive behavior was less frequent. One member drew a connection between socializing and cohort support.

We can get so caught up in school and I don’t think it’s healthy for us to breathe and sleep school all the time. So I think that spending time outside of school would just add another dimension of support for each of us.

Participants expressed a desire to increase cohort social interactions outside of school to strengthen support seeking in other areas of members’ lives.
Levels of Acceptance Influence Openness in Cohort Interactions

Once again, relationship interactions played a key role in members’ participation in the learning process. For participants, relational acceptance and judgment influenced engagement in cohort learning interactions. The perceived presence of acceptance from cohort members facilitated increased openness in cohort learning interactions. The perceived presence of judgment from members led to limited participation.

In general, participants noticed increased openness from cohort members as a whole during conversations. Cohort members expressed more personal reactions, emotions and experiences with each other. Greater openness also involved more authentic expression within the cohort. Participants perceived members to be expressing themselves more fully without editing comments or holding back natural reactions. A member viewed the change as “conversations where I feel like we’re being much more raw, and just putting what comes to our mind out there.” During this time, participants noticed members’ unique personality characteristics to be coming out in daily cohort interactions. Members demonstrated willingness to express uncertainty, to disclose positive and negative emotions and to express disagreement.

Participants related their increased openness in cohort dialogue with the levels of safety and acceptance they perceived from members. When a member disclosed more personal material to the cohort, members observed the cohort’s reactions and perceived accepting responses. After seeing another member take a risk and find acceptance, other members found it easier to share personal elements with the cohort. Participants often remarked that the courage of another member to speak frankly in cohort conversations influenced their own decision to express themselves more fully. A member described the incremental process.
People have shared things and not been judged. And so I think that has kind of little by little somebody would share something and nobody judged them. And then they would say, oh okay, well then I’ll just go ahead and share this.

Participants also perceived a learning benefit from more open cohort expression, speaking of a parallel development between greater depth of sharing and greater depth of learning.

The perceived absence of acceptance, or presence of judgment, from cohort members contributed to less authentic engagement in cohort interactions, limiting learning opportunities. Participants expressed concern in some instances about members’ potential reactions if they chose to disclose more personal elements of their experience. They felt concern about what topics were acceptable in the cohort. They avoided sharing challenges with others due to a concern about affecting other members negatively. Regardless of reasoning, participants limited more personal contributions to cohort learning interactions when perceiving a potential lack of acceptance. The dynamic also applied to interactions when students outside of the cohort were present. Participants limited authentic expression, reporting less certainty of the level of trust, safety and acceptance that had been more developed within the cohort.

*Cohort Interactions Provide Enhanced Understanding of Self and Clients*

Participants viewed cohort interactions as opportunities to develop self and interpersonal awareness. They encountered increased insight through cohort interactions in several ways. Being a part of the cohort inherently provided opportunities for personal exploration as members developed more awareness of how they interacted with each other and the unique roles that members assumed within the cohort. As members worked to establish connections within the cohort they developed awareness of their own unique challenges in relationship development. Participants referenced specific experiences within the cohort that facilitated insight about
personal characteristics. Through cohort feedback, one member became aware of her own discomfort being helped by others.

They were like we’ve noticed that you like to be strong, and be you know, and when we try to help you and try to acknowledge things, we kind of notice how you are, but you do need to make sure you take care of yourself. So just those reminders, but initially was a kind of uncomfortable piece but only because it’s just like I’m normally the helper.

At times, members offered feedback to each other about how their behavior was perceived in the cohort. Member feedback provided opportunities to explore personal behavior and its implications in relationship with others.

Interpersonal learning experiences in the cohort provided new awareness about professional roles. Participants applied lessons learned in the cohort to their roles as counselors. Members reflected on their experiences as cohort members. They identified interpersonal behaviors that facilitated the learning process and behaviors that impeded the process and applied their conclusions to their work as counselors and counselor educators. From this perspective, participants viewed all cohort interactions as interpersonal learning opportunities that related to their professional work. As one member explained it, “I’m continuing to build relationships and getting close to people, and just how relationships grow or flourish or change, or even die. And so, all of it’s a learning experience honestly.”

Participants also reported increased understanding of clients’ experiences as a result of cohort interactions. Members encountered opportunities to both provide and receive help at different times with other cohort members. Each role facilitated reflection on the experience of helping and being helped. The member who gained awareness of her own discomfort being helped by others applied her newfound self-insight to develop greater understanding of client experiences. She explained, “It’s helped me learn from a client perspective too how clients may feel when it comes to getting help. You know, they might come here but what it may be like. It
may be difficult, feeling uncomfortable initially.” Comparing cohort experiences with helping interactions in the counselor-client relationship, participants reported gaining a greater appreciation for clients’ needs.

*Conflict Decreases Trust, Safety, Sharing*

Participants expressed awareness of how cohort conflict may impact learning interactions. Members experienced conflict as disrupting established levels of relational safety and trust between cohort members. Because of the presence of cohort conflict, participants expressed uncertainty whether safety that had developed between members still existed. A member explained the nature of the uncertainty.

I felt in a good place just with everyone, and feeling that I really let myself just, let down my guard more and just really being more who I am. So, and I feel that that’s really been received well by some people. So I think that’s a little bit of this disappointment too is oh no, you know, things were getting good, and really getting better, and I’m just. So that’s part of the caution, you know. The boats being rocked right now.

With relational safety in question, participants expressed concerns about confidentiality between members. In response, members limited personal sharing at times with cohort peers.

*Round 3 Interviews*

During the final semester of the academic year when the third round of interviews took place, all participants enrolled in two common courses: a third installment of a clinical internship course that involved providing counseling services in a campus clinic, and an academic course on counseling supervision. Individual members also chose additional courses related to their unique academic and clinical goals.
Final interview conversations unfolded differently than prior rounds. In previous interviews, I initiated the process. Participants often waited for me to respond with questions before providing additional information. During final meetings, participants demonstrated greater attention to the focus of inquiry and seemed more intentional about what they contributed to the interview. Several participants remarked that they had been thinking about what they needed to tell me prior to the interview. I required little use of prepared questions because participants identified what was most important to share about learning in a cohort. I facilitated further exploration of topics through open-ended follow up questions.

The length of interviews proved to be another unique characteristic. Roughly half of the interviews lasted less than 1 hour, with 4 ending before the fifty minute mark. In one instance, a participant ended the interview prematurely due to another obligation. But in all other cases, participants indicated they had covered all of the areas related to the topic. I also felt a sense that participants’ experiences and perceptions had been exhausted. It is possible that increased intentionality and focus on the topic yielded rich data in a shorter period of time. The potential also exists that data collection may have been reaching a saturation point for several participants, indicating a reduction of new information on the topic (Trigwell, 2000).

_Cohort Dialogue Facilitates Integration of Learning Experiences_

Cohort dialogue played a larger role in member learning than previous semesters. Participants indicated that cohort conversations inside and outside of class increased understanding of concepts, provided opportunities to apply concepts, and facilitated integration of concepts with all learning experiences.
Similar to the previous round, participants perceived cohort dialogue to enhance understanding of concepts introduced in class. Members valued discussions with cohort members as means to explore new concepts and develop understanding at more complex levels. Participants utilized cohort dialogue to enhance application of concepts. Members often experimented with concepts in cohort conversations, applying ideas to real world contexts. Participants described the role of cohort dialogue within a broader process of learning. Members presented ideas to other members, sought responses to evaluate their applications of different concepts, reflected internally on awareness gained from dialogue, and then utilized concepts in counseling practice. A member explained, “I get it contextually when I’m reading in a textbook or whatever but it just makes sense to me in application when I’m able to process it with people …and then the more impactful my learning experiences are becoming.” Cohort discussions led to individual reflection and ultimately application of concepts.

Cohort dialogue facilitated integration of concepts and learning experiences. In addition to understanding and application of concepts, participants viewed cohort conversation as a context to integrate class concepts with personal views and experiences. Members utilized informal cohort conversations outside of class to incorporate related personal elements to achieve a more comprehensive grasp of material. Participants reported a shift in dialogue content that took place between class and outside settings such as the doc lounge. They observed class conversations adopting primarily a conceptual, clinical and theoretical focus. After class, members continued conversations in other settings, bringing in personal views and life experiences to make broader meaning of class concepts. One member described a learning experience that began in class and continued later with cohort members.

I was able to integrate something you know, and experience with a professor, and with kind of not academic, philosophical portion of it. And then, take my personal portion of
it, which you know I may say, I wasn’t gonna get completely into in that whole big group. But I felt comfortable with those few select cohort members who were sitting there.

Beyond the added personal element that cohort dialogue allowed, participants also reported using conversations to integrate all of their learning experiences throughout the program. As one member noted, “I know I process almost everything in a sense. I mean I process my clients. I process a class if it was significant in some way, which not every class is, but if it was, I’ll process that.” Members incorporated learnings from reading assignments, class activities, clinical and teaching experiences to make meaning for their roles as counselors and counselor educators.

*Seeking Different Perspectives to Clarify Own Views*

Participants described an intentional search for the diverse ideas of members to help shape and solidify their own perspectives. Unique to this category in comparison to other rounds was the intentional use of cohort dialogue to strengthen knowledge and beliefs. Beyond the goals of increased understanding and expanded viewpoints, members sought out dialogue with others to develop and fine-tune their own views. A member discussed how exposure to different perspectives influenced her own thoughts.

> It’s getting tweaked, you know, hearing other people’s experiences or where they’re coming from in those discussions, it’s impactful for everyone. And so I know for myself, like it makes me just think about it a little different. Or it might make me say, oh gosh, yeah, I wanna explore that more. Or I have a better understanding of where that’s coming from. And it it just makes, for my own perspective, makes me dive into it a little deeper.

Participants reported knowing which members were more likely to offer differing perspectives on specific topics and initiating conversations with them to foster enhanced learning.
Exposure to differing views through cohort dialogue provided a number of benefits to member learning. Similar to previous interview rounds, dialogue inside and outside of class provided members learning opportunities by hearing other members discuss their personal and professional experiences. Participants also identified new benefits. At times, discussing divergent clinical views allowed members to practice explaining clinical rationales to improve their communication skills with potential clients. When confronted with different perspectives, members examined their own assumptions and re-evaluated their previous conclusions. Participants reported being influenced by others’ ideas and changing their own opinions based on new awareness. At other times, participants experienced confirmation of their beliefs in the face of diverse opinions. Participants described a reflective process that took place during and after cohort conversations where they would assess whether to incorporate or dismiss differing perspectives. One member described her reflection process.

Just talking it out, that verbal exchange, and then but I still have to let it kind of resonate with me internally, if I don’t I don’t think that I get as much from it. Like just talking it is like a process that I go through, the external exchange. And then internally then okay so how does this fit with me as a counselor? How does this fit with me right now?

Member perspectives provided broader clinical insight for members. Participants reported seeking conversations with members to discuss client conceptualizations. They consulted members who utilized similar and different theoretical orientations for counseling. Through exchange of ideas, participants reported gaining expanded understanding of clients’ experiences. Clinical feedback from members also provided new perspectives to consider. While receiving feedback from members regarding clinical cases, participants described an experience of gaining an outside perspective of their own views. In addition, participants reported that members suggested counseling intervention strategies when consulting about clinical cases. They perceived the information as useful skills to consider in future clinical work.
Each Member Responsible for Learning of the Cohort

Participants perceived all members of the cohort as critical contributors to the learning process. Each member retained responsibility to participate in cohort learning interactions to benefit the learning of all members. Participants expressed a belief that each member of the cohort brought unique qualities, characteristics, strengths, and group roles to the learning process of the whole group. A member described the role of each member in the learning process.

We all bring some different opinion and perspective to the table and how I see it more as our cohort kind of moving to a place where we are starting to know these unique differences in each of us, and pulling that out of each other more.

Because all members offered distinct elements for cohort learning, the cohort as a whole relied on them to do their part.

All members served as valuable sources of knowledge. Participants reported that they sought out members for consultation about their work as counselors and counselor supervisors. During consultation, members sought out and gained new knowledge and resources from members. Participants also clearly viewed themselves as valuable sources of knowledge for other members. They recalled moments when they were consulted by other members and were able to offer their perspectives and knowledge. Participants also expressed awareness of their own participation in cohort dialogue as a whole, noting unique elements that they contributed to cohort conversations. One member identified a role of helping members understand clients’ experiences.

I think the one role that I have maybe stepped into, and maybe it’s because I relate more to this, but client conceptualization, or I’m working with this client. Or different ideas, and I feel like I can offer, well I wonder if the client’s dealing with this? Or I’m wondering if maybe you know, like really kind of seeing the client perspective.

Members served as co-teachers and sources of knowledge. A mutual dynamic existed during consultation interactions with members sharing thoughts about the topic and written
resources gained in other settings to enhance performance. Participants explained that they were teaching each other. Members studied together to gain greater understanding of class concepts and assignments. As co-teachers, members explained concepts to each other based on their own areas of strength. When someone lacked understanding of a concept, the member who felt more confident about the topic served a teaching role, explaining the concept to help others learn.

Participants sought to know more about their cohort members as a way of improving collaborative learning interactions. Knowing members more informed how to interact and learn together. Participants described an ongoing process of figuring out how to work together with members. They sought to understand the personalities and work styles of members to know how best to collaborate without conflict. Participants also reported the need to identify partners for collaborative professional projects. Knowing more about members’ areas of interest and time availability helped to identify potential work partners. Members sought partners with similar interests for project collaboration.

Cohort Creates Higher Motivation to Engage in Learning Process

Participant comments related to the category reflected the same conception identified in round two interviews: learning in the cohort facilitated increased motivation to be an active part of the learning process. Increased motivation influenced academic exploration and productivity. Unique to this round, participants expressed an energizing effect by being around cohort members. Cohort members somehow contributed added energy to endure long days at school. Also, participants reported increased awareness of the quality of their schoolwork because of being known by cohort members. Essentially, members operated with less anonymity in the
cohort compared with traditional education environments and that element influenced members’
motivation to produce quality work.

**Being In It Together Fosters Mutual Understanding for Learning**

Participants perceived shared experience and mutual understanding with cohort members
to provide needed support for learning while perceived differences limited learning
opportunities. The learning community structure, with common course enrollment and
consistent time together at school, facilitated supportive interactions in the cohort. Participants
perceived the cohort’s shared experiences to provide opportunities for members to give and
receive support. Members discussed common reactions to program experiences, such as class
sessions, supervision meetings, and interactions with professors, providing each other
opportunities to reflect on learning experiences and make meaning. Some members also shared
common life experiences, including illnesses or deaths of family members, childhood
experiences, wedding engagements, and financial difficulties. Participants reported seeking and
receiving support from each other during challenging experiences related to school and their
larger lives. They described it as a checking in process that occurred on an ongoing basis
between individual members. A member stated, “I’ve learned to pick up on when somebody’s
not doing well, or when they may be stressed, just to check in and say hey is everything going
okay? You look a little bit different, or you’re not as talkative.” Participants indicated knowing
members well enough to perceive when they needed support and taking time to have individual
conversations to offer emotional support.

Cohort members benefited from shared experiences through a perception of cohort
togetherness. Participants expressed awareness and appreciation that all members were going
through the program together. One member expressed, “I’m not progressing through the program alone, I’m progressing through the program with people. I’m progressing through the program, this sounds a little extreme but for people, almost.” Members experienced universality (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), a sense that they were not alone but together, going through the same experiences and challenges as other members. Participants’ described the learning process in collective terms to conceptualize it as a cohort task.

Awareness of common school challenges provided support for enhanced learning. Members experienced validation of their own academic and clinical struggles by observing other members encounter similar difficulties. As one member described it, “hearing my cohort members share the same kind of, similar challenges…I’m thinking yeah, I can so identify with you. I’m so right there. And just being a little bit more okay with a struggle or a challenge.” Participants reported greater acceptance of their own challenges knowing that others struggled in similar fashion.

Members placed a high value on the cohort for learning interactions because of perceived mutual understanding among members. Participants indicated that they preferred learning conversations with cohort members to others. One member described a learning experience with cohort members that progressed beyond what was possible in the classroom.

[Faculty member] doesn’t really know that stuff sitting in there. So I was able to then take that piece and bring it into the room with the cohort cause they’ve already been, they know that past. And I was then able to integrate those things, and say okay, so you know this past of mine, and you also were sitting there when I was having this experience, and you know that I’ve been struggling with this piece of my theoretical orientation, and you know they were really able to walk me through it.

They perceived cohort members to possess greater knowledge about their life experiences and school challenges, allowing them to facilitate a richer learning experience. Participants reported seeking moments with only cohort members present to debrief certain learning experiences.
Participants noticed a negative impact on their learning experiences when perceiving cohort members to have different characteristics and interests compared with theirs. When participants experienced a lack of common ground with cohort members, they sought fewer interactions and participated in fewer cohort conversations. Members perceiving themselves as different in some respect expressed a more individual learning experience, in contrast to the earlier experience of cohort togetherness.

Although participants identified beneficial aspects of cohort diversity for learning in other categories, they also noted disadvantages when members possessed different interests than the majority of the cohort. Participant experiences demonstrated how differences in clinical specialties and professional research interests limited opportunities for collaborative learning. When members pursued a clinical specialty different from most cohort members, it resulted in having access to fewer members for consultation and fewer opportunities to give and receive feedback. One member explained, “I’m not getting much classmate feedback. No only when I present my cases usually…. Yeah, so I mean I would definitely value people watching my tapes. That just doesn’t happen very often.” Participants who possessed unique areas of clinical specialty within the cohort perceived that they experienced fewer opportunities to access the cohort for learning support compared with other members. When consultation occurred, members viewed others as disinterested or inexperienced in their clinical specialty area, limiting opportunities to receive feedback for clinical learning.

Participants also reported experiencing disconnection from cohort learning conversations due to concentration on areas less related to their own clinical work. Members with unique clinical specialties perceived a division between members with common clinical interests and
other members. They perceived members in the majority group to be advantaged for learning due to increased opportunities for collaborative conversations about clinical experiences.

Differences in professional and research interests also contributed to disadvantages in the learning process. Participants who possessed unique interests in professional topics compared with a majority of members reported experiencing greater difficulty identifying partners for research projects and professional conference presentations. Members whose research interests differed from most of the cohort collaborated less, creating a larger burden to generate project ideas and carry them out to completion on their own. One member noted, “If I want to research something I kind of have to come up with it on my own, cause there’s no one else in my cohort that’s really thinking about that.”

Members with different specialties and interests experienced separation from much of the cohort when it came to clinical and professional collaboration. They described their learning process as more individual than collaborative for professional development. Participants observed members who shared clinical and research interests to be more engaged with each other to learn through coursework and professional activities, taking additional courses together and collaborating with similar faculty members for research and professional projects.

*Experience of Acceptance Facilitates Increased Authentic Expression*

Participants identified an environment of acceptance within the cohort as influential for increased authentic expression. Participants perceived themselves and other members to be expressing themselves more fully in cohort interactions than in previous semesters. Participants described member expression in developmental terms, noting that members took increasing risks to speak honestly in cohort conversations and to express their personalities in social situations.
Members offered more authentic contributions and experienced no judgment from the cohort, which encouraged further expression. One member described the change in cohort sharing: “I feel like people talk about things that they might not necessarily have been comfortable with talking about before. Just either in their personal lives, or relationships with faculty, or experiences that they’re having.” Participants perceived a qualitative difference in the level of authenticity among the whole cohort. Members spoke more freely in discussions without censoring or editing their words.

Participants identified authentic member expression as valuable for member learning. Authentic expression included increased participation in cohort dialogue, more personal disclosure, greater honesty in clinical feedback, and more frequent expression of disagreement. Participants expressed more willingness to disclose their academic and clinical struggles with members. By sharing areas of weakness, members gained opportunities to seek feedback from the cohort. Participants also expressed a belief that more personal expression in cohort dialogue facilitated higher quality integration of class material with personal beliefs. One member described a class interaction that facilitated both personal and professional expression and reflection.

I was able to kind of let go and let a few tears fall and we were able to process it. Not only process the philosophical portion of it, but also process my emotional part. Like I said, the ways that my personal life impacted it.

As members included personal elements in cohort discussions, their unique beliefs and values became a part of the dialogue, allowing greater reflection on the connections between academic concepts and personal experiences. Finally, authentic cohort conversations yielded a richer diversity of perspectives. Members were more likely to express different perspectives with one another for the benefit of the whole cohort.
Cohort Interactions Provide Enhanced Understanding of Self as Counselor

Cohort interactions provided opportunities for members to gain insight about their own personality characteristics and their relationship behavior. Participants viewed lessons learned about themselves through cohort relationships as valuable to their work as counselors.

Participants reported developing new self-awareness regarding personality characteristics, beliefs related to professional work, and professional efficacy. Interactions with members provided opportunities to explore personal characteristics. Participants reported greater awareness of their own personalities and how they manifested in cohort relationships. As a result of new self-insight, members gained greater sensitivity to recognize their personality characteristics at play in other relationships. A member recounted how a cohort interaction provided interpersonal learning that applied to personal and professional relationships.

I did a lot of exploration of okay where’s that coming from and what’s going on? And I realized that it was probably a lot of my superiority tendencies coming up when I’m talking to this person. And how might that be coming up for me when I’m interacting with faculty or when I’m interacting with clients? And I realized that it was coming up in other areas.

Cohort interactions also provided members opportunities to develop new perspectives about their own levels of professional competency. Participants reported increased self-confidence as counselors and counselor educators due to encouragement and support experienced from cohort members. When members received feedback from others highlighting their areas of strength, they experienced increased confidence in their abilities.

Interpersonal learning through cohort interactions provided members increased awareness of their relationship behaviors as cohort members and counselors. Participants reported that conflict experiences within the cohort provided opportunities to examine their reactions to members and to explore their behavior in cohort relationships. Members received feedback
about how they were perceived by other members, providing additional interpersonal awareness. Participants reported that exploration of interactions with cohort members provided awareness of their own relational behavior with clients. A member attributed clinical growth to cohort relationships.

My level of confidence is, it’s always been something I’ve struggled with, and it’s probably one of the most evident things for me that’s been growing or increasing throughout this semester…. I feel like I’m allowing myself to have more confidence because I feel maybe more heard.

Conflict Management Impacts Quality of Learning Experiences

The title and definition of this category of description shifted after receiving feedback from participants during the member check meeting. The initial title of the category was “presence of conflict impacts involvement in learning.” When reviewing categories with participants, a lengthy discussion developed regarding members’ experiences of conflict in the cohort. Participants agreed with the core perception of the category: experiencing conflict with members influences levels of trust and safety, potentially leading to decreased participation in conversation. Some participants confirmed that dynamic as representative of their experiences. In addition, participants recalled experiences of conflict that led ultimately to increased levels of trust, safety and sharing with other members. The difference in outcome related to the way members managed conflict experiences with one another. A member described a positive outcome when discussing conflict with a member.

I felt sort of challenged, like what, do you think that your opinion’s right and mine’s wrong? And I think she was feeling the same way in a lot of ways. And so it really took me acknowledging that and figuring out where it was coming from, and I did eventually tell her… What do you think is going on here? And she was like, oh yeah that makes sense. Maybe that is what’s going on. So we kind of talked it out and I think our conversations went better since then.
When members acknowledged and discussed conflict experiences and reached a level of mutual understanding, then trust between members was strengthened and members experienced closer connections. When conflict went unresolved, members perceived less trust and safety in the cohort and participation in learning conversations was compromised. Members used caution to decide what to share in cohort conversations when unresolved conflict existed, perceiving a greater concern about member reactions. Participants considered cohort conflict to be an expected and natural phenomenon during the life of the cohort. However, members possessed varying levels of satisfaction with how conflicts had been managed within the cohort.

Participants encountered conflict with cohort members in several ways that impacted the quality of learning. They reported experiencing two forms of conflict: internal feelings of irritation toward a member and external expression of conflict between members. Participants expressed awareness of temporary internal negative reactions to other members related to personality differences and behavior in the cohort. Participants also described conflict experiences involving direct communication between members regarding feelings of irritation, disagreement, or dissatisfaction with behaviors. Whether expressed or unexpressed, participants described these conflict experiences as natural occurrences expected in any group spending a considerable amount of time together.

Conflict experiences served to limit learning opportunities within the cohort. When conflict existed, participants noticed decreases in openness to learning, authentic expression, and quality of learning encounters. Members experienced less willingness to learn from members when conflict existed between them. Conflicts outside of class held the potential to influence members’ learning behavior during class. Participants reported valuing members’ contributions less in cohort dialogue due to conflicts outside of class. Members also limited self-expression in
cohort dialogue in times of conflict. Participants experienced decreased relational safety due to conflict and withheld learning feedback from members due to concern about how it would be received. Participants reported feeling stress related to member conflict that lessened the quality of their learning experiences. Members viewed conflict as a drain on personal energy. Members experienced school as less enjoyable and felt less motivation to be present. Participants noted that stress related to member conflict negatively impacted academic performance. During this interview time, participants expressed motivation to attend to cohort relationships to minimize conflict.

Member involvement in learning also suffered in response to the conflict experiences of other members. Seeing other members experiencing conflict with professors served to limit learning behaviors. Members felt empathy for peers who encountered conflicts with faculty members. Participants reported feeling protective of their cohort members. A member explained, “I do feel protective, and I know that that impacts me in class. I sort of feel myself shutting down sometimes and I get kind of angry and I don’t want to contribute to class anymore.” Feelings of empathy and protectiveness limited learning opportunities by creating less motivation to engage in class activities with professors.

Competition for limited resources provided another aspect of conflict that negatively impacted learning experiences. Faculty members’ limited availability for academic and research support served as a context for cohort member competition for resources. When cohort members realized faculty member availability would not accommodate all members’ wishes for mentoring relationships, participants reported feeling a sense of urgency about securing commitments from faculty members.
Competition between members emerged due to limited resources available. During the member check meeting, participants provided feedback regarding the nature of competition they experienced. Participants identified their competitive intentions as focused on securing faculty member support to meet their own unique needs in the program, not a direct aim to undermine or outpace other cohort members. They perceived the issue of limited resources to be an inherent problem created by program structure and faculty availability, rather than something created by the cohort. One participant referred to the experience as “forced competition” between members.

Regardless of intentions, members experienced different levels of satisfaction with the process by which faculty resources were secured and the outcomes for cohort member learning. Participants noticed inequity in the process the cohort employed to secure faculty member assignments. A member expressed regret over the outcome. “I feel bad for those cohort members who didn’t get anywhere near who they were hoping to get, and were just kind of left hanging…. And it’s gonna affect the rest of their time here, all four years.” They perceived to have missed opportunities for cohort collaboration to achieve more equivalent learning outcomes for all members. Members perceived cohort competition to have resulted in unequal learning resources for members, resources that may impact learning experiences for the remainder of members’ doctoral careers.

Member Check

After the research team identified categories of description for all three rounds of data collection and recognized relationships between all categories, I met with the entire cohort to present results. I conducted a focus group style meeting to familiarize participants with results
and to receive their comments regarding the extent to which the results accurately represented their perceptions and experiences. I conducted a visual presentation of all categories using Powerpoint software. I reserved time for cohort discussion after each category and each round throughout the presentation.

During cohort conversation, individual participants expressed recognition of their views and experiences in various aspects of all categories. All cohort members identified aspects of categories, and at times complete categories as representative of their perceptions and experiences over the course of the past academic year. Contrary to Collier-Reed et al.’s (2009) concern about the usefulness of member checking for phenomenographic research, participants recognized themselves in the results and offered feedback to further clarify elements of several categories.

The member check meeting provided further data to integrate into the larger collection of results. I recorded the meeting using a digital voice recorder and listened to the recording to make written notes of all statements offered to clarify or adjust categories of description. All participant responses referred to specific categories and are presented accordingly. Participants offered clarifying feedback regarding 5 separate categories.

*Relationship Development Enhances Learning Experiences*

Within the first round of results, the cohort discussed emotions related to relationship development. They acknowledged the presence of different feelings for different members. Some participants reported feeling uncertain and anxious about how cohort relationships would develop. They did not know what to expect from other members and how their relationships would impact learning experiences. One member did not personally identify with anxiety or
limiting expression during the first round, but observed it in others. Some participants reported feeling excited and hopeful about the future of cohort relationships. They expected to experience a positive learning environment in the cohort and experienced an eagerness to engage with members.

*Cohort Creates Higher Motivation to Engage in Learning Process*

Regarding second round results, participants discussed experiences of cohort influenced motivation. One aspect included in the category originating in the second round involved a motivation to go above and beyond academic expectations in class assignments. A participant described a unique experience that seemed to contradict the subtheme. In this individual’s experience, cohort members provided guidance to utilize efficient academic strategies to maintain a manageable workload. In this case, a participant developed study skills that reduced work instead of seeking more engagement. Although this phenomenon may also relate with the category addressing members as co-teachers and sources of knowledge, it stands as a unique aspect of the cohort’s impact on member engagement in learning.

*Conflict Management Impacts Quality of Learning Experiences*

During the member check meeting, participants provided clarification regarding their conceptions of cohort conflict. The final category title reflects feedback provided by participants regarding their experiences with cohort conflict and its influence on learning. Participants responded to the original category, presence of conflict impacts involvement in learning, with several clarifying points. First, participants viewed conflict within the cohort as an expected and inevitable part of cohort dynamics. They understood the mere presence of cohort conflict to
have no inherently positive or negative influence upon cohort learning interactions. Instead, participants identified management of cohort conflict as an important factor for relationships needed for learning. How the cohort responded to conflict made the difference between a positive or negative learning experience. Participants explained when cohort members discussed conflict with each other and reached mutual understanding or resolution; they perceived increased safety and experienced richer learning conversations. When conflict went unexamined or unaddressed by the cohort, members experienced less safety in cohort interactions and limited participation in dialogue.

Cohort feedback also clarified the boundaries of their relational conflict. Participants acknowledged experiences throughout their year of study when conflict was present between members, and at times between members and professors. However, participants reported experiencing no conflict with students outside of the cohort. They acknowledged that the presence of outside students decreased levels of trust, safety and sharing at certain times due to less relationship development compared with cohort members. Participants reported decreased participation in cohort dialogue, withholding personal material when non-cohort members were present.

Participants also provided clarifying feedback regarding the nature of cohort competition. They described their competitive intentions as focused on securing faculty member support to meet their own unique needs in the program, not a direct aim to undermine or outpace other cohort members. Participants described their cohort as non-competitive. They explained the presence of competition originated from member anxiety about academic resources, fueling a sense of urgency to secure faculty advisor support.
Outcome Space: Structural Relationships between Categories of Description

In phenomenographic research, the outcome space represents all categories of description and the relationships between them to provide meaning beyond the mere description of participants’ conceptions (Marton, 1981). Because the lens of phenomenography assumes a non-dualistic view of the world, researchers see participants as not separate from their environment, but inherently related and intertwined with it (Akerlind, 2012). Likewise, their perspectives and experiences do not exist as lone conceptions, but as related to one another. Although results typically indicate hierarchical relationships with increasing levels of complexity (Akerlind & Kayrooz, 2003), categories may also be of equal value (Barnard, McCosker, & Gerber, 1999). The outcome space provides a collective framework of participants’ various ways of understanding and experiencing a phenomenon.

The outcome space for the study represents both the structural and referential aspects of participants’ conceptions. The structural aspect includes the combination of features focused on by participants. Analysis of categories of description across time revealed 9 distinct structural elements: dialogue, diversity, knowledge, motivation, support, shared experience, relationship development, interpersonal awareness and conflict.

As primary researcher, I identified all 9 structural elements in emergent fashion by reviewing relationships between categories of description across time. Team analysis resulted in the identification of relationships between categories across interview times. I discerned each longitudinal strain of categories to reflect a distinct structural component of learning in a cohort. Each structural element denotes an area focused on by participants to understand and experience learning in a cohort environment. As represented graphically in Figure 1, the structural elements relate directly to participants’ understandings of learning in a cohort, indicating each strain of
categories to be an important part of participants’ conceptions. Also, lines connecting all structural elements indicate the relatedness between all structural elements. Some structural elements were not represented by categories during all rounds, suggesting that certain critical aspects of learning in a cohort were not in participants’ awareness at that time.

The referential component of the outcome space refers to the meaning assigned by participants to their experiences of cohort learning. The categories of description represent the various ways of understanding learning in a cohort. Categories within each structural area of focus demonstrate longitudinal variations in meaning, shown in Figure 2. The relationships between categories within each structural area are hierarchically related. Categories of description, or participants’ conceptions of learning in a cohort, develop sequentially over time with latter categories including and expanding upon previous categories. Figure 2 displays structural strains of categories in separate columns with rows designating the round of origin for all categories. Discussion of each strain of related categories reveals a more complex picture of the longitudinal changes in participants’ conceptions of learning in a cohort over the course of their first year of study.

Cohort dialogue, as a structural aspect, emerged as important for participants during the second and third rounds of interviews. During the second round, participants viewed dialogue to provide enhanced understanding of class concepts. In the third round, participants demonstrated awareness of the potential for cohort dialogue to enhance understanding, but also to aid integration of learning experiences.

Categories demonstrated the relevance of diversity for cohort learning throughout all rounds of interviews. During round one, participants’ conception identified diversity as a general source for learning. By the second round, participants displayed awareness of broadened
viewpoints because of member diversity. In the final round, participants intentionally sought different perspectives from one another to clarify their own views.

*Figure C.2. Outcome space: structural relationships.*

Participant conceptions demonstrated a shift in the value of members as knowledge sources throughout the study. In the first round, participants identified professors as primary sources of knowledge, seeing cohort members in lesser alternative roles. During the second round, participants viewed themselves and other members as co-teachers and equally valuable sources of knowledge as professors. By the third round, participants understood all cohort members to be valuable knowledge sources and individually responsible to contribute to the learning of all.
Table C.1

**Outcome Space: Structural and Referential Relationships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structures</th>
<th>Round 1</th>
<th>Round 2</th>
<th>Round 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expecting</td>
<td>Experiencing</td>
<td>Utilizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cohort dialogue enhances understanding and application of concepts</td>
<td>Cohort dialogue facilitates integration of learning experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Cohort diversity as a source of learning</td>
<td>Members’ different perspectives provide broadened viewpoint</td>
<td>Seeking different perspectives to clarify own views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Professor as primary knowledge source</td>
<td>Members as co-teachers and valuable sources of knowledge</td>
<td>Each member responsible for learning of the cohort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Cohort as external motivator to perform</td>
<td>Cohort creates higher motivation to engage in learning process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Cohort as mutual support system</td>
<td>Member relationships facilitate support needed for learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Experience</td>
<td>Sharing common experiences helps members cope</td>
<td>Being in it together fosters mutual understanding to enhance learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Development</td>
<td>Relationship development enhances learning experiences</td>
<td>Levels of acceptance influence openness in cohort interactions</td>
<td>Experience of acceptance facilitates increased authentic expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Awareness</td>
<td>Cohort interactions provide enhanced understanding of self and clients</td>
<td>Cohort interactions provide enhanced understanding of self as counselor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Conflict decreases trust, safety, sharing</td>
<td>Conflict management impacts quality of learning experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A strain of categories identified motivation as an important aspect of cohort learning. During the first round, participants experienced the cohort as an external motivator to perform academically and clinically. Interview rounds 2 and 3 reflected a more complex understanding of the motivating aspects of cohort membership. Participants understood themselves to not only feel externally challenged to achieve at higher levels, but also internally motivated to seek understanding and professional competency beyond external modes of evaluation such as grades.

Categories related to support developed hierarchically as well over time. During the first round of interviews, participants wanted mutual helping interactions with members including emotional and academic support. At the second round, participants demonstrated awareness of a need to attend to member relationships as a means of giving and receiving support to enhance learning.
Categories of description highlighted the role of shared experience in cohort learning. During the first round, participants viewed common experiences with each other as a way to cope with the learning environment. During final interviews, shared experience still aided coping but participants conceptualized the experience more broadly, as being in it together and gained mutual understanding, which provided higher quality learning interactions.

Relationship development emerged as a structural element throughout the study. Participants indicated relational trust, safety and acceptance influenced the learning process. During the first round, members expressed a need for safety and trust before contributing personal elements in cohort dialogue. The second round conception highlighted the influence of acceptance upon members’ openness in learning interactions. Finally, in the third round participants viewed the experience of acceptance to facilitate increased authentic expression in the cohort for enhanced learning encounters.

Categories of description in the second and third rounds highlighted participants’ experiences of interpersonal learning within the cohort. During the second round, participants identified increased awareness of self and clients through member interactions. The third round revealed a new aspect of interpersonal learning centered on members’ professional roles. Participants demonstrated increased awareness of their relational behavior with clients because of encounters with cohort members.

Conflict emerged as an important structural aspect of learning in a cohort during the second and third rounds of interviews. The initial conception focused on conflict as a negative influence on relational trust and safety with members, expressed as decreased sharing in cohort conversations. The third round category, further informed by cohort feedback during the member check meeting, focused on cohort member responsibility in the midst of cohort conflict.
Participants viewed members as responsible for the development or decrease of trust and safety depending on their conflict management behavior.

Summary

Researchers analyzed transcripts from all participant interviews conducted at three times across the cohort’s first year of study in a doctoral program for counselor education. Analysis revealed distinct categories of description for each round of data collected. Researchers identified relationships between categories across time. Participant categories indicated 9 structural areas of focus related to learning in a cohort environment: dialogue, diversity, knowledge, motivation, support, shared experience, relationship development, interpersonal awareness, and conflict. Within each structural area, participant categories demonstrated sequential shifts across time, indicating changes in participants’ perspectives and experiences of learning in a cohort throughout the first year of study.
APPENDIX D

EXTENDED DISCUSSION
Throughout this study, I explored the various ways doctoral level counseling students experience learning in a cohort environment during their first year of study. Two essential questions guided the inquiry. First, what are the various ways students conceptualize and experience learning in a cohort? The resulting categories of description represent many distinct conceptions of the phenomenon that emerged from the collective experiences of participants. Second, I wanted to explore how students’ conceptualizations and experiences of learning within a cohort develop over time. Analysis of data across three interview points yielded relationships between categories that indicate clear changes in student conceptions over time, represented graphically in an outcome space. The phenomenography research tradition aims to provide useful insights into the learning experiences of students to inform pedagogy. Overall, these findings establish further support for the use of learning communities in counselor education and offer new additions to the knowledge base that may inform the use of doctoral cohorts in counselor education.

In the following discussion, I explore the relevance of results for counselor education, identify implications for pedagogy, discuss the potential for future research, and review limitations of the study to place results in their proper context. Throughout the discussion, I situate findings within the context of current research and literature regarding learning communities and counselor education.

Patterns in Cohort Learning

After reviewing and reflecting upon categories of description and their relationships, I identified several broad characteristics of the results that provide important insights into cohort learning. Because of the structural relationships between conceptions, the discussion explores
results at a collective level to infer useful material for counselor educators, rather than treating each category individually. Patterns include connections between cohort learning and group development theory, the development of increased engagement with the cohort, the impact of shared experience on learning, the utilization of cohort diversity as a source for learning, and the influence of cohort conceptions on the learning process.

Cohort Development

A review of related categories reveals a developmental progression of the cohort as a whole, similar to other types of groups. Group theorists (Tuckman, 1965; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) describe a general path of group development. Members enter a group with anxiety and an eagerness to conform. Over time, anxiety decreases and members risk honest sharing, encounter conflict, and react emotionally to group demands. Further development involves conflict management and establishment of new expectations. Members experience closeness and utilize the group as a means to accomplish their goals (Tuckman, 1965; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

Results indicate that participants experienced cohort development in a similar fashion. Categories reflect members’ experiences over time to include increased self-disclosure, openness to feedback and collaboration, and experiences of conflict and cohesion. Categories related to relationship development show increasing self-disclosure and openness in cohort interactions over time. Cohort members perceived more personal sharing in their conversations during the fall semester. By the spring semester, members experienced a broader form of openness with each other, perceived as authentic self-expression. Categories related to knowledge and diversity indicate increased collaboration between members to enhance learning as they perceived each other as increasingly important in the learning process. Cohort members perceived the
knowledge and perspectives of others to advance their own learning, not unlike any typical group where members collaborate with each other to achieve their goals (Tuckman, 1965; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

**Conflict**

Participant conceptions reflected the presence of cohort conflict and interpreted its effects on cohort learning. Categories related to conflict display a variation in ways of understanding its role in the cohort. The earlier conception emerging during the fall semester highlighted negative consequences of conflict, noting regression in relationship development and decreased participation in cohort dialogue. Lemna (2000) observed a similar cohort dynamic where the presence of conflict combined with low interpersonal awareness of members coincided with less team building interactions. Current results provide a more complex view of cohort conflict, highlighting the manner in which it is handled. During the spring semester and the member check meeting, members perceived the management of conflict to determine its effects on the cohort. Members acknowledged the potential for conflict to impact relationship development and dialogue in positive and negative ways depending on the degree of resolution reached. Clarke et al. (2007) noted lower self-disclosure in interprofessional cohorts when conflict went unresolved. Current results indicate a similar dynamic, but also note the potential for conflict, when managed successfully by members, to lead to stronger relationships and higher quality learning conversations. At the end of their first year of study, participant conceptions indicated a continued presence of unresolved conflict, suggesting that further conflict management would be required to reach a more productive developmental level (Tuckman, 1965). Group theorists (Tuckman, 1965; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) acknowledge successful conflict management as an
important developmental task for a group to reach a level of cohesion needed for productive work to occur.

*Cohesion*

Group cohesion also played a role in cohort development. Johnson et al. (2005) defined cohesion as a collective experience of belonging or closeness. Although not directly reflected in categories of description, members often used the term cohesion when describing their experience of cohort relationships. A review of categories related to relationship development highlights members’ focus on the development of close relationships to benefit learning experiences. During initial interviews, members indicated a desire for cohort cohesion as a way of enhancing learning and the cohort experience in general. Throughout the following rounds of interviews, members referenced relative progress in achieving closeness in the cohort. Participants’ attention to their collective closeness may represent an element unique to the field of mental health due to its clinical focus. However, researchers of learning communities also acknowledged cohesion as a contributor to the cohort learning process. Gabelnick et al. (1990) identified cohort cohesion as a key dynamic that created greater student interaction. Arduengo (2005) found cohesion, characterized by mutual trust and personal disclosure, facilitated learning of content. Leshem (2007) noted increased conceptual capabilities in doctoral students engaged in collaborative learning within a cohort.

*Relationship Development*

An emphasis on relationship development to enhance learning exists within multiple strains of categories in the outcome space. Categories related directly to relationship
development reveal members’ attention to levels of trust, safety, and acceptance in cohort interactions. During initial interviews, members expressed a need for safety and trust in cohort relationships to allow more personal contributions to cohort conversations. Gabelnick et al. (1990) described the same dynamic noting that students struggled with cohort dialogue due to fear of judgment in the presence of others. Related categories from rounds 2 and 3 identified acceptance from other members as a key requirement to allow for authentic expression within the cohort. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) also suggested that safety, trust and acceptance between group members served as a precondition for self-disclosure.

Across all interview times, members viewed relationship development as crucial to allow higher quality learning interactions in the cohort, providing support for previous findings in learning community research. Clarke et al. (2007) and Wathington et al. (2010) identified perceived safety in cohort relationships as important to facilitate risk taking in cohort dialogue. Dorn et al. (1995) found risk taking in the form of sharing opinions within a cohort to be positively associated with degree completion in learning communities. Current results support existing literature and research asserting the importance of relationship development to enhance cohort dialogue.

Results identified support as another important outcome of cohort relationship development. Categories related to the topic situated support within the context of cohort relationships. Although the cohort initially viewed cohort support as the acts of giving and receiving academic and emotional help, they later identified the need for close member relationships to facilitate supportive interactions including academic and emotional learning experiences. Smith (1993) suggested learning communities met students’ support needs by providing a challenging and nurturing environment. Similar to previous research (Brazier,
members utilized cohort relationships to provide academic and emotional support that helped members cope with their learning experiences.

Overall, participant conceptions emphasized the importance of relationship development to enhance cohort learning. Categories indicate members sought trust, safety and acceptance in relationship with one another to create an environment for meaningful learning interactions and mutual support. Wathington et al. (2010) described this dynamic as a “communal cohort” (p. 226), characterized by a supportive climate, close relationships, high peer interaction and common goals. The researchers noted these conditions seemed to foster individual and collective learning. Current results provide support for their suggestion that these communal elements are necessary for optimal learning experiences in a cohort.

Interpersonal Learning

Cohort members identified interpersonal learning experiences as valuable for personal and professional growth. Counselor educators also support the development of self and other awareness for counselors in training to enhance clinical practice (Hansen, 2009; Zorga, 2003). Cohort members understood cohort interactions to facilitate enhanced self-insight, client experience, and professional development. An initial category reflected members’ experiences of increased awareness of personal characteristics and client experience. Through cohort interactions, members provided relational feedback to one another, initiating new self-insight and greater clarity in client conceptualizations. Learning community researchers identified similar dynamics in student cohorts. Students in a supportive and analytic learning environment are more likely to use self-reflection (Adams et al., 2000) and experience personal development (Stassen, 2003).
During the final round of interviews, members demonstrated an expanded view of interpersonal learning. A category reflected members’ continued gains in self-insight and client experience and demonstrated expanded awareness of their relational behavior with clients. Both categories highlight a process of interaction, reflection, and learning that resembles group development theory. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) described a “constructive loop of trust, self-disclosure, feedback, and interpersonal learning” (p. 375) characteristic of a cohesive group.

Within the context of counselor education, interpersonal learning occupies an important area of focus for pedagogy (Hansen, 2009). Categories related to interpersonal development highlight the role of cohort interaction as a source for interpersonal learning experiences. Relationship encounters facilitated reflection on personal and professional levels. Loewenthal and Snell (2008) considered interpersonal learning experiences necessary elements of the educational process for counselors to prepare them to facilitate similar learning experiences for clients. The authors described the phenomenon as emotional learning, involving a “personal element with a focus on psychological change” (p.40). Cohort members reported emotional learning experiences in the context of cohort relationships. Categories of description related to interpersonal learning highlight a process whereby members interacted with one another, developed new emotional awareness, and applied learning to their personal and professional lives. Researchers and educators report the presence of interpersonal learning throughout learning community literature (Loewenthal & Snell, 2008; Reynolds, 1997; Reynolds & Hebert, 1998; Stassen, 2003). In a qualitative study of undergraduate cohorts (Wathington et al., 2010), faculty perceived cohort students as more empathic and sensitive to the needs of others in comparison with their non-cohort peers. Students in cohort environments demonstrated more
affective learning compared with traditional students (Reynolds, 1997; Reynolds & Hebert, 1998).

Cohort Engagement

A review of category relationships across times illuminates a pattern of members’ increasing engagement with the cohort to enhance learning. Within education literature, authors define engagement, also referred to as involvement (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009), as the physical and psychological energy students invest in school (Astin, 1999). Consistent with previous findings (Stassen, 2003), categories of description demonstrate members’ increasing efforts to engage in the learning process through cohort interaction. Categories related to motivation, knowledge, diversity, and support demonstrate the trend.

Throughout all rounds of interviews, members perceived the cohort as a motivating force to engage in the learning process. The initial category reflects what Ryan and Deci (2000) call extrinsic motivation, described as taking action because it may lead to a separate outcome. During the first round, members saw the cohort as an external motivator to perform academic and clinical tasks. They expressed feeling pressure to perform well in front of their peers and wanting their work to reflect a high quality to provide value to other members. Reactions of others served as an extrinsic outcome for performance. A category present in rounds 2 and 3 more closely represents intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), or taking action because it is inherently interesting or gratifying. Members experienced an increased motivation to engage the learning process because of a strong desire to learn. They experienced the passions and interests of other members to facilitate and expand their own interests in the learning process. Beishuizen (2008) also found learning community environments support the acquisition and development of
self-regulated learning, the use of personal thoughts, feelings, actions and intentions to plan and attain learning goals.

Categories related to knowledge demonstrate a clear progression toward engagement in the form of member responsibility for cohort learning. An initial conception identified professors as primary sources of knowledge, viewing cohort members as alternate or less valuable resources in the learning process. As time progressed, members developed awareness of the roles of members as co-teachers and valuable knowledge sources. Ultimately, the cohort held each member responsible for the learning of all members, suggesting increased engagement with members. Participants experienced increased motivation to seek collaborative partners for academic and professional tasks. They sought out specific members because of their unique strengths to aid comprehension of complex ideas and master difficult skills, identified as cognitive engagement (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Likewise, members sought opportunities for behavioral engagement (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), providing knowledge and resources to others by participating in cohort conversations and collaborative projects.

Members also experienced increased engagement in cohort interactions to benefit from the diverse perspectives and experiences of members. Learning community proponents suggest that cohort environments provide greater intellectual stimulation through exposure to diverse perspectives (MacGregor et al., 2002). Categories related to diversity reflect how the cohort placed increasing value on the different viewpoints of members to broaden awareness. Finally, members intentionally sought out differing perspectives to facilitate reflection and clarify opinions. Participants’ utilization of cohort diversity reflects previous research findings. In an early exploration of students’ cohort experiences, Gabelnick et al. (1990) found that members
appreciated the diverse perspectives of others and developed new perspectives of their own through cohort dialogue.

Fredericks et al. (2004) identified emotional engagement as students’ positive and negative reactions to instructors, peers, learning experiences and the school environment. Categories related to support indicate that members utilized cohort relationships for mutual academic and emotional support. Members gave and received empathy, understanding and validation as they discussed their reactions to learning experiences. In a study of multiple learning communities (Tinto et al., 1994), members also experienced increased emotional support through engagement in cohort interactions.

Shared Experience

Cohort members spent extended amounts of time together in both class and informal settings throughout each week. They began their doctoral studies at the same time and enrolled in common courses each semester. Essentially, the cohort shared many learning experiences throughout the year. Therefore, it may come as no surprise that member conceptions of learning in a cohort highlighted the importance of shared experiences. MacGregor et al. (2002) noted educators originally developed learning communities to build community and foster shared learning experiences.

Categories related to shared experience display a growing awareness of the role of shared experience for member learning. Near the beginning of their first semester together, members took solace from their shared positions. Common experiences provided reassurance that they were not alone in their challenges and that their reactions to learning experiences were similar to other members. Members viewed shared experiences as opportunities to identify with each other
and cope with their learning environment. Cohort structure fostered student connections (MacGregor et al., 2002).

By their third semester together, the cohort perceived a broader purpose. Members described learning in a cohort in terms of being in it together. Time together fostered mutual understanding among members that allowed higher quality learning interactions. Results coincided with previous research indicating cohort environments facilitated intellectual interaction (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Stassen, 2003) and collaborative learning among students (MacGregor et al., 2002). Members valued the cohort over others for learning conversations because members understood their unique backgrounds and learning needs. When members perceived themselves as different from others, quality learning interactions were limited. Differences in clinical specialties created barriers to learning interactions and academic support. Additional elements of cultural diversity, such as ethnicity, gender and age, may also influence learning interactions between cohort members.

Cohort Diversity

Throughout the entire study, member diversity emerged as a critical aspect of learning in a cohort. Participants attributed their academic, clinical, and interpersonal learning experiences to the diverse backgrounds, perspectives and experiences of cohort members. Variation learning theorists perceived diversity as a critical component of the learning process. They defined learning as a change in the way one sees or experiences some aspect of the world (Marton & Booth, 1996). Experiencing variation in perspectives is a necessary part of learning (Runesson, 2006). One reason for the development of learning community models was to foster deeper exploration and understanding of different perspectives (MacGregor et al., 2002). Categories
related to diversity, dialogue and knowledge reflect the various roles of member differences for cohort learning.

The cohort demonstrated increasingly complex conceptions of the role of diversity for learning throughout the study. In an initial category, members described member diversity as a potential source for learning, expecting to benefit from members different perspectives and experiences throughout their time together. During their second semester, a category reflected a continued value placed on diversity for learning, but also acknowledged new and broader awareness of concepts because of cohort learning experiences. Consistent with learning community research, members viewed cohort dialogue as a means to enhance understanding and application of concepts (Leshem, 2007). Through academic dialogue and clinical feedback, members exposed each other to different ways of understanding concepts related to curriculum. As noted by learning and group theorists (Ingerman, Berge, & Booth, 2009; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), the group provided variation needed for members to learn by gaining awareness of new aspects of the world (Marton & Booth, 1996).

During their third semester of study, members noticed an expanded role for diversity in the learning process. Categories indicated that exposure to different perspectives helped members explore and clarify their own views. Through cohort dialogue inside and outside of class, members encountered various perspectives on the same concept, which allowed for clearer understanding of their own views. Bowden and Marton (1998) suggested that students become aware of their own way of seeing something through contrast with other ways of seeing the same thing. Cohort members highly valued the different perspectives and experiences that existed in the cohort and sought out dialogue with specific members to encounter their unique ways of seeing things. Bowden and Marton (1998) used the term “collective consciousness” (p.189) to
describe a dynamic element of the learning process where students celebrate diversity and seek out diverse perspectives as part of a larger understanding of the world. Over time, the cohort expressed a growing respect for member differences as sources for personal and professional learning.

Categories related to knowledge highlight another way members perceived diversity as important for learning. Over time, cohort members assigned increasing value to their cohort peers as knowledge sources. Initially members viewed the cohort as an alternative resource when faculty was unavailable. In later conceptions, members served as co-teachers offering valuable knowledge to the cohort. At the broadest level, members not only saw each other as co-teachers, but as unique individual contributors to the collective learning of the cohort. Tsui (2004) conceived of this collective experience as a “shared space of learning” (p. 170) where meaning is co-constructed by all involved. Student dialogue provides an interchange that creates common ground between participants and meanings are negotiated and clarified (Tsui, 2004). As a whole the cohort perceived each member to bring a distinctive set of experiences and perspectives for the benefit of all. Without the presence and contributions of any single member, cohort learning suffered. Likewise, Marton and Tsui (2004) theorized that those involved in academic discourse both create and limit what can be learned in any encounter. Students contribute to the space of learning by their participation and limit learning by their absence. Cohort members’ conceptions related to diversity, dialogue and knowledge reflect an increasing awareness of the capacity of the cohort to enhance individual learning.

Meta-Learning Process: Conceptual Development of Learning in a Cohort

A review of the outcome space reveals a consistent pattern of conceptual development
over time. Comparing categories longitudinally within each structural strain, cohort members expressed increasingly complex conceptions of learning in a cohort. This pattern represents a broader learning process identified by variation learning theorists whereby the cohort developed new and more complex ways of understanding learning in a cohort over time (Marton & Booth, 1996). Pang (2003) suggested the learning process involves dynamic changes in states of awareness at the same time and over time, leading to new ways of experiencing something.

Because the identified object for the study was learning in the context of a cohort, participants provided data regarding the cohort’s role in their learning experiences. The holistic structure of categories in the outcome space also provided a picture of the cohort’s meta-learning process: learning about learning in a cohort. Over the course of an academic year, cohort members displayed greater awareness of various aspects of learning in a cohort that informed their participation in the learning process.

As members gained expanded awareness of the cohort’s potential to enhance learning experiences, they utilized cohort interactions in new ways. Expanded awareness of the features of learning in a cohort, the meta-learning process, influenced new learning behavior in the cohort over time. Each round of categories reflects a unique characteristic that highlights changes in members’ relationship with cohort learning throughout the study. Figure 2 includes reference to a characteristic for each round: expecting, experiencing, and utilizing. Member conceptions expressed early in the first semester of study reflected a character of expectation. Although members had already begun to make meaning of their initial limited cohort experiences, much of their conceptions consisted of expectations, beliefs, hopes, and wishes about how the cohort would later affect the learning process. Much like any beginning group (Tuckman, 1965; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), participation generally took the form of early relationship development as
members attempted to discern their respective places and roles in the cohort. Members’ use of the cohort for learning enhancement was limited.

By the second semester, member conceptions reflected a character of experience. Categories represented various ways that the cohort environment influenced the learning process. Members demonstrated first hand awareness of cohort learning experiences, including dialogue, diversity of perspectives, member co-teaching, academic and emotional support, relationship development, and conflict. They expressed increased awareness of how each aspect of cohort membership influenced the learning process. Cohort participation increased in the context of natural opportunities presented by cohort structure, including conversations and collaboration in class and the doc lounge. Members utilized cohort interactions more fully to enhance learning when opportunities presented themselves.

Member conceptions during the third semester revealed a new level of cohort engagement, taking on a character of utilization. With a more complex understanding of the benefits and disadvantages of cohort interactions for learning, members intentionally engaged the cohort to maximize opportunities and minimize barriers for learning. They sought learning interactions with specific members to meet their unique learning needs, including exposure to diverse perspectives to clarify their own views, relational and clinical feedback for interpersonal learning, and project collaboration. At times, members addressed conflict with each other to avoid negative impact on relationships and learning interactions. Members not only valued the cohort as a unique context for learning, but also used it intentionally to meet learning needs.

Summary

Results provided a picture of members’ developing conceptions of learning in a cohort
throughout their first year of study. Members perceived various aspects of a cohort environment as beneficial for academic, clinical, and interpersonal learning, offering support for the use of learning communities in doctoral-level counselor education programs. Member conceptions over the course of an academic year placed cohort learning in a developmental context. Cohort members described a conceptual and experiential progression similar to the course of other types of groups. They demonstrated increasing awareness of how learning was impacted by relationship development, cohort engagement, shared experience, and member diversity. As members became more aware of the potential benefits of cohort learning they utilized cohort interactions intentionally to enhance the learning process. Overall, the developmental structure of members’ conceptions may inform the use of doctoral cohorts in counselor education.

Implications for Practice

Results offer support for the use of learning community models for doctoral-level counselor education. In this section, I review the implications of results for learning community implementation and pedagogy. Members perceived the cohort context to offer unique opportunities for academic, clinical, and interpersonal learning. The nature of phenomenographic outcomes also provided useful information to inform learning community design and pedagogy. Phenomenographic researchers attempt to understand students’ learning processes in order to identify complementary pedagogical strategies (Pang, 2003). As Marton and Booth (1996) asserted, “in order to teach well, it is imperative to learn continuously from the learner” (p. 561). By understanding students’ various ways of understanding cohort learning, teachers may discern critical aspects of the experience and develop strategies to foster student awareness of the potential learning opportunities available within a cohort. Faculty may design
and implement learning communities to complement students’ learning needs and maximize the benefits of cohort membership for student learning.

A strong developmental theme emerged throughout the study suggesting that counselor educators consider issues of cohort development when designing and implementing learning community models. Members’ conceptions of learning in a cohort environment highlighted both individual member growth and a collective path of development for the cohort as a whole that lead to increased utilization of the cohort to enhance learning. I begin with a discussion of implications related to collective cohort development followed by exploration of implications for pedagogy to support cohort capacities to enhance learning.

Implications for Cohort Development

Current results and previous research in the area of cohort learning (Wallace, 2005) suggest student cohorts develop in patterns similar to other types of groups. These findings deserve attention from counselor educators to inform their design and facilitation of learning communities. Creating learning communities with cohort development in mind involves issues of community structure and pedagogy.

Learning Community Structure

Wathington et al. (2010) described cohort structure as necessary but not sufficient for optimal cohort learning interactions. Educators may enhance learning community design and provide a strong foundational structure for learning by aligning structural elements with the group development knowledge base.
Common course work defines the structural nature of learning communities (Wathington et al., 2010). Students attend 2 or more courses in a semester or academic year. Educators may consult group development theory to inform the sequence of courses. In the current study, members valued cohort courses over other options throughout their first year. During formative stages of cohort development, members utilized cohort classes to develop relationships and begin building cohesion. Later, members valued common courses due to the increased safety, trust and acceptance created. They viewed their own class participation to be more engaged and authentic in cohort classes compared with classes including a mix of cohort and non-cohort students. This pattern suggests students may benefit from cohort only courses during initial semesters to foster relationship development (Wathington et al., 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Continued common course work throughout the program would also allow members to benefit from the foundation of cohort development achieved, facilitating increased engagement and productivity in the learning process (Clark et al., 2007; Gabelnick et al., 1990; Tuckman, 1965). When considering an optimal balance of cohort and non-cohort courses in a program, educators may elect to employ cohort-only formats when curriculum mastery requires higher levels of personal and professional risk taking or collaborative learning.

In addition to course considerations, results of the study highlighted the importance of physical space for cohort learning interactions. Categories of description identified informal cohort gathering space as an important element for cohort dialogue, relationship development, and engagement in the learning process. Members often referenced informal gathering space known as the “doc lounge” to be a critical element for cohort connection, dialogue and collaboration. Similar to results from previous qualitative research (Matthews et al., 2011), members viewed the doc lounge as a place to form friendships, build social and academic
support networks, and create a sense of belonging. Counselor educators may consider providing informal space to facilitate informal cohort interactions outside of class. Study results and learning community research suggested that cohort members utilize informal interactions to enhance understanding of concepts (Leshem, 2007) and develop relationships (Wathingon et al., 2010). Current results and cohort literature highlight the crucial role of informal interactions in the learning process, suggesting that the fullest extent of cohort learning may not take place in the classroom.

In the current research setting, the doc lounge served primarily as a gathering place for a single cohort, providing a measure of privacy for cohort members. Participants expressed appreciation for the privacy provided by the space to allow cohort conversation within the bounds of safety and trust established by the cohort. With cohort development in mind, educators may consider cohort privacy needs when providing informal space for cohort interactions, allowing cohorts to continue the ongoing process of group development crucial for quality learning interactions (Clarke et al., 2007; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

Categories of description reflect members’ awareness of program faculty as an important element of learning community structure. Learning community models include both students and faculty as important contributors to the learning process (Gabelnick et al., 1990; MacGregor et al., 2002). Participants experienced faculty as sources of knowledge, facilitators of cohort dialogue, partners in learning, and facilitators of program structure. Results of the study in light of group development theory suggest counselor educators consider the role of faculty in learning community structure beyond curriculum and pedagogy. Group development literature highlighted the importance of trained facilitators to help groups achieve developmental tasks.
Learning communities designed to be responsive to cohort development needs may include faculty involvement with cohort development tasks. Faculty may offer useful assistance as a cohort begins its working relationship. During its early stage of formation, cohort members likely experience anxiety regarding their place in the group and look for ways to belong by conforming to perceived expectations (Tuckman, 1965). In the current study, members expressed a similar anxiety and uncertainty during their first semester, withholding personal self-disclosure until an environment of trust was established. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) noted that the establishment of a safe environment for member disclosure is essential for further group development. If early risk taking goes unacknowledged or rejected, cohort development may stagnate.

Because of their own training in counseling and group work (CACREP, 2009), counselor educators possess unique abilities to facilitate the development of a beginning student cohort. Learning community structure may include pre-class orientation activities designed to begin cohort relationship building. During first semester cohort classes, faculty may incorporate activities into curriculum that facilitate early member connections. During the first round of interviews only a few weeks into their initial semester, members identified class activities as the primary source for cohort interaction and relationship development, expressing a wish for more relationship building opportunities outside of class. Member experiences reveal an opportunity for faculty to enhance cohort development early in the process.

The emergence of conflict is another key juncture in the development of most groups (Tuckman, 1965). As member anxiety decreases, members risk honest feedback and encounter conflict. Cohort member conceptions and previous cohort research (Clarke et al., 2007; Lemna, 2000) demonstrated the presence of conflict within student cohorts as well. If managed well,
conflict experiences may lead to cohesion and increased group productivity (Tuckman, 1965; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Current member conceptions and previous group literature suggest conflict left unresolved leads to a breakdown in communication, including decreased participation in learning dialogue (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Educators may identify roles for faculty members to facilitate cohort conflict when needed. Clarke et al. (2007) found that cohort conflict, although a natural phenomenon (Tuckman, 1965), did not resolve in cohorts without expert facilitation. Students who experienced conflict reported increased divisions between members. Counselor educators have completed training in group facilitation (CACREP, 2009) and may possess expertise needed to allow cohort members to navigate conflict and develop stronger relationships for collaborative learning.

**Pedagogy for Cohort Development**

Patterns of cohort development may provide useful information to inform the design of curriculum and instructor engagement in cohort classes. Through their assignments and interactions with student cohorts, faculty members may encounter opportunities to facilitate cohort development. Group work educators conceptualize a class as a type of group and design assignments and in-class activities to meet group development needs of students throughout the course (Eriksen & Bruck, 2011; Orr & Hulse-Killacky, 2006). Faculty members teaching cohort courses may view their role as co-facilitators of the development of the cohort. Using a cohort development lens, instructors may adjust curriculum and class format to complement the current developmental needs of the cohort.

Results of the current study revealed cohort members viewed the task of learning in a cohort differently over time, suggesting changes in their learning needs from early to latter stages
of their first year of study. Member conceptions demonstrated increasing awareness of the value of the cohort for knowledge and learning interactions. Pedagogy through a developmental lens may include an emphasis on relationship development during formative stages of the cohort and employ collaborative learning activities and assignments that facilitate member interaction with increasing amounts of personal and professional risk taking over time, coinciding with the development of cohort climate (Johnson et al., 2005). As cohort cohesion develops, faculty members may find themselves in less demand from the cohort to direct class dialogue (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) as members assume more responsibility to engage in a collective learning process. In the current study, members experienced increasing levels of engagement with the cohort for learning as the year progressed and began to seek out members for learning opportunities. As the cohort embraced a more active role in the learning process, members expressed appreciation for instructors they perceived as encouraging cohort initiative in class discussions. At that point in the cohort’s development, members viewed more traditional class formats to limit interactive cohort learning. Marton and Tsui (2004) cautioned educators against adopting a more powerful role in class discourse typical of traditional teaching models, noting that a power differential can limit the collective meaning making process. The authors suggested that less powered students engage less (Marton & Tsui, 2004).

Pedagogy in Support of Cohort Learning

Current results along with previous learning community research highlight the benefits of cohort membership for student learning (MacGregor et al., 2002; Stassen, 2003). By discerning the critical aspects of the cohort environment beneficial for learning, counselor educators may utilize pedagogical strategies to enhance the effects of cohort learning (Pang, 2003). Participants
identified several structural aspects of learning in a cohort that provide areas of focus, including
dialogue, diversity and interpersonal awareness.

Counselor educators interested in facilitating student growth in cohort classes will view
learning as a collective process and facilitate collaborative learning opportunities. Categories
related to dialogue and diversity reveal an emphasis on collaborative learning. Member
conceptions of the cohort as a source of diverse resources reflect humanistic and constructive
educational theories with their attention to student efficacy and the co-creation of meaning
(Dollarhide & Granello, 2012; McAuliffe, 2011). Throughout the current study, members valued
the diverse perspectives and experiences of cohort members. They demonstrated increasing
participation in and utilization of cohort dialogue to gain broadened viewpoints and to integrate
academic curriculum with clinical and personal experiences.

Through course planning and class facilitation, counselor educators will encounter
ongoing opportunities to incorporate cohort dialogue and collaborative experiences to maximize
the value of a collective learning process. Through collaborative exploration of class topics,
instructors and students expose one another to various conceptions of the subject matter (Lucas,
2001) allowing students to be exposed to diverse views and develop more complex frameworks
of knowledge (Dollarhide & Granello, 2012; McAuliffe, 2011). Interactive learning experiences
engage cohort members as cooperative agents in the learning process, encouraging personal
interaction and reflection between members (McAuliffe, 2011). Pedagogy designed to support
cohort learning facilitates dialogue and experiential interaction.

Results of the study indicated cohort interactions facilitated interpersonal learning inside
and outside of class. Counselor educators may seek strategies to include interpersonal learning
opportunities within learning community structure and pedagogy. According to member
conceptions, the cohort environment provided enhanced opportunities for interpersonal learning relevant to personal and professional life. Members experienced relational insight through cohort interactions and applied newly developed awareness to their roles as counselors. Cohort members viewed the cohort environment as an experiential context to integrate academic, clinical and interpersonal learning. Counselor educators may consider employing a course sequence that involves concurrent academic and clinical courses to allow students opportunities to apply personal growth to counseling practice (Loewenthal & Snell, 2008). Within clinical courses, formal and informal feedback interchanges provide opportunities for interpersonal awareness. CACREP (2009) program standards require individual or triadic and group supervision for students completing practicum and internship components. Supervision meetings provide opportunities to facilitate self and other awareness related to counseling practice. Because participants engaged in supervision together, their interactions as a cohort influenced clinical learning experiences.

In the current study, cohort members viewed informal cohort interactions as opportunities to discuss and reflect upon interpersonal experiences gained in formal settings such as clinical supervision and class meetings. Based on results of the study, cohort members benefitted from a balance of formal and informal conversations to make meaning of academic and clinical learning experiences. Loewenthal and Snell (2008) suggested that interpersonal learning occurs not through skill development but in the form of personal, existential encounters with others. These findings suggest that students benefit from opportunities beyond class time to interact, debrief and continue the learning process.

Member conceptions of learning in a cohort over the course of an academic year provided counselor educators valuable information to inform the design and implementation of learning
communities. Results of the study revealed a process of cohort development involving increasing awareness of and engagement with the cohort as a collective learning agent. Group development theory and research provided guidance for educators to align their program structure and pedagogy with the developmental needs of student cohorts. Results also identified critical aspects of learning in a cohort that counselor educators may enhance through course design and facilitation. Counselor educators may use the knowledge gained from the current cohort to inform learning community strategies for graduate counseling students.

Implications for Future Research

This study represents an initial inquiry into the nature of cohort learning in counselor education. Results provide only the beginning of a knowledge base to understand the experiences of graduate counseling students in a cohort environment. As Akerlind (2012) notes, all outcome spaces are inherently incomplete. The results provide an initial exploration into the lived worlds of doctoral level counseling students in learning communities. Further exploration of cohort learning in counselor education is required to gain a more comprehensive grasp of students’ learning experiences and discover the unique conditions that enhance personal and professional development.

Results of the study produced 9 structural elements, or critical aspects, of learning in a cohort environment from the perspective of participants (Marton & Pong, 2005). Qualitative and quantitative inquiry into specific aspects of cohort learning may provide a more complex understanding of the benefits and limits of learning community models.

One of the primary aims of the study involved exploring any potential changes in participant conceptions of learning in a cohort over time. The longitudinal element of the current
study allowed a pattern of cohort development to emerge from participant categories of description. Further inquiry into the nature of cohort development and its impact on student learning would provide educators greater information to inform learning community design and teaching strategies.

The current study employed a method of phenomenography to explore student conceptions for providing counselor educators useful and applicable information to inform program design and pedagogy. A variety of learning community models exist in the field of counselor education (Schweiger et al., 2012). A comparative examination of program models (Stassen, 2003) would illuminate differences in learning outcomes between approaches and identify critical program elements for success in learning community implementation in counselor education. Further inquiry into pedagogical approaches and their effects on cohort learning would also provide faculty with guidance to coordinate faculty involvement in learning community models and potentially develop best practices for counselor education in cohort environments.

Limitations of the Study

The current study presents various limitations readers must consider when interpreting the results. The main limitations relate to the research design and the person of the primary researcher. In spite of the diversity in phenomenography literature regarding the number of participants needed to discern all variations of conceptions, the sample size of the identified cohort for this study may not provide enough diversity to generate saturation in conceptions. To compensate for this potential limitation, I employed a longitudinal design that allowed for greater
breadth of information and extended time with participants to ensure that their perspectives were well represented.

The length of the study also limits the level of understanding that can be created from participant data. Although the longitudinal research design allowed researchers to represent students’ experiences across the first year of study, a second year follow up study was not included. Data collection ended before the cohort reached advanced levels of development as noted by the continued presence of unresolved conflict during the third round. Without further study, latter stages of cohort development remain unexplored. Further research will be required to explore the learning experiences of doctoral students after two or more years within a cohort. Many learning community models employ a much shorter duration for student cohorts (Stassen, 2003); however, information about longer-term cohort experiences may inform future decisions about learning communities in postgraduate settings.

My role as researcher and identity as an upper level doctoral student may have negatively impacted data collection due to a perceived power differential by participants. As part of the notice of informed consent, I assured students that their participation or non-participation would not affect their standing in the counseling program in any way, and that all information would be kept confidential. However, the topic of study required a focus on students’ daily thoughts and reactions to their learning environment, the university and the counseling program. I acknowledge that participants may have chosen to limit disclosure about relationship experiences with peers and faculty. Limited expression during interviews would impact data collection and analysis, and ultimately limit the variation in student conceptions discerned. As interviewer, I worked to establish a collaborative environment with each participant that transcended the initial power differential afforded researchers to establish a relationship founded on trust and respect.
Due to the qualitative nature of this study, results are not generalizable to settings beyond the research project but rather are subject to evaluation of transferability, or relevance beyond the current project (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The outcome space itself inherently presents an incomplete and subjective picture of student conceptions of learning in a cohort (Akerlind, 2012). Readers must judge the credibility and usefulness of the study for their own unique contexts. A comprehensive discussion of the research setting is included to allow discernment about relevance for other educational settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within the tradition of phenomenography, Akerlind (2012) suggested that results be judged for their “pragmatic validity” (p. 123), the extent to which findings provide useful insights into more effective ways of teaching and learning. Ultimately, the relevance of findings are inherently linked to the context of the research project.

The contribution that the study makes to our understanding of cohort learning in counselor education outweighs the inherent limitations in the design. Through this project, I explored and represented various ways that doctoral students understand and experience learning in a cohort. Counselor educators may utilize results of the study to inform pedagogy in doctoral programs. With a more comprehensive understanding of students’ learning experiences, counseling programs may design their learning environments to enhance the context that impacts the development of our future counselors and counselor educators.

Summary and Conclusion

A longitudinal inquiry into doctoral counseling students’ conceptions of learning in a cohort environment provided various perspectives and experiences of the phenomenon over the course of a single academic year. Categories of description and their related structure revealed
critical aspects of cohort learning to inform the use of learning communities in counselor education. A review of the holistic structure of results in an outcome space revealed several patterns and dynamics of members’ learning experiences. Over the course of the first academic year of study, members developed increasing awareness of the potential learning benefits of cohort interaction and developed more in depth strategies to utilize the cohort to enhance learning. The cohort viewed its development over time in ways similar to other types of groups, marked by increasing engagement, participation, and self-disclosure. The presence of cohort conflict and cohesion highlighted the importance of relationship development for enhancement of cohort learning interactions. Counselor educators may consider redesigning learning communities to support cohort development, including extended use of common courses, provision of informal cohort space for relationship development and collaborative learning, and faculty facilitation during key cohort developmental transitions. Additionally, faculty members may design curriculum and class activities to facilitate and support cohort development throughout the program.

Results identified several critical aspects of the cohort learning process that provide useful knowledge to inform educational practice. The cohort environment served to enhance several areas of the learning process for students. Cohort dialogue stimulated intellectual and emotional development through exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences. Counselor educators enhance cohort learning by stimulating cohort dialogue and incorporating collaborative learning experiences. Shared experiences between members provided support and made the cohort more valuable as a source of learning. The cohort provided enhanced motivation to engage in the learning process and members assumed increasing amounts of responsibility for cohort learning over time. Cohort interactions provided a context for integrating academic,
clinical and interpersonal learning crucial for counselor education. Educators may design learning communities to take advantage of cohort interactions as learning experiences. The perspectives and experiences of cohort members highlighted the value of a cohort environment to enhance learning in counselor education. The cohort developed a shared space of learning that offered members a diverse world of perspectives, experiences, and interactions that created expanded awareness of counseling and counselor education. Because of cohort membership, students developed new ways of understanding their field, the essence of learning (Marton, 1981).
APPENDIX E

OTHER ADDITIONAL MATERIALS
Institutional Review Board

Informed Consent Form

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

**Title of Study:** Understanding doctoral level counseling students’ experiences and perceptions of learning in a cohort environment during the first year of study.

**Student Investigator:** David Huffman. **Supervising Investigator:**

**Purpose of the Study:** You are being asked to participate in a research study that involves exploring doctoral students’ experiences of learning within a cohort of students who are enrolled in the same academic and clinical courses. The study will examine how doctoral students in the first year of a counseling program experience and interpret their learning and participation in a cohort.

**Study Procedures:** You will be asked to complete a survey of demographic information that will take you approximately 5 minutes or less to complete. You will also be asked to participate in three interviews with David Huffman, the student investigator, to discuss your experiences as a doctoral student. The first interview will take place during the first month of the summer 2012 semester. The next interview will take place during the first month of the fall 2012 semester. The final interview will take place during the first month of the spring 2012 semester. Each interview will take approximately one hour or less of your time and will be audio-recorded. Interviews will be conducted at a time and place on the campus that is convenient for you.

**Foreseeable Risks:** No foreseeable risks are involved in this study.

**Benefits to the Subjects or Others:** This study is not expected to be of any direct benefit to you, but we hope to learn more about the learning experiences of doctoral level counseling students to inform the future application of the cohort learning model to enhance student learning.

**Compensation for Participants:** None

**Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality of Research Records:** All demographic surveys and interview transcripts will be assigned a code for identification. No names will be attached to surveys or research notes, and identifying information will be maintained in a separate location. The confidentiality of your individual information will be maintained in any publications or presentations regarding this study.

**Questions about the Study:** If you have any questions about the study, you may contact David Huffman at

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Review for the Protection of Participants: This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB can be contacted with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects.

Research Participants' Rights:

Your signature below indicates that you have read or have had read to you all of the above and that you confirm all of the following:

- David Huffman has explained the study to you and answered all of your questions. You have been informed of the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study.
- You understand that you do not have to take part in this study, and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. The study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time.
- Your decision whether to participate or to withdraw from the study will have no effect on your grade or standing in this course or the counseling program.
- You understand why the study is being conducted and how it will be performed.
- You understand your rights as a research participant and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study.
- You have been told you will receive a copy of this form.

________________________________
Printed Name of Participant

________________________________                                ____________
Signature of Participant                                     Date

For the Student Investigator:

I certify that I have reviewed the contents of this form with the subject signing above. I have explained the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study. It is my opinion that the participant understood the explanation.

______________________________________                    ____________
Signature of Student Investigator    Date
Participant Survey

Study Title: Understanding doctoral level counseling students’ experiences and perceptions of learning within a cohort environment during the first year of study.

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. If you are uncomfortable answering a question, please skip the question and move on to the next.

1. Indicate your age group.
   - 19 or younger
   - 20-29
   - 30-39
   - 40-49
   - 50-59
   - 60-69
   - 70 or above

2. Indicate the ethnicity with which you most closely identify.
   - American Indian and Alaskan Native
   - Asian
   - Black or African American
   - Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
   - White, Non-Hispanic
   - White, Hispanic
   - Self-Identify as ____________________

3. What is your relationship status?
   - Single
   - Married
   - Partnered but not married
   - Divorced
   - Separated
   - Widowed

4. How would you describe your gender?
   - Male
   - Female
   - Transgender
   - Self-Identify as ____________________

5. Regarding children, I have:
   - No children
   - Adult children
   - Minor children who live in my home
   - Minor children who live in my home part-time
   - Minor children who do not live in my home
6. How many hours of course work are you currently taking? _____

7. How many hours of course work do you plan to enroll in for the upcoming fall semester? _____

8. Your current employment status is:
   - Research Assistant _____
   - Research Fellow _____
   - Teaching Assistant _____
   - Teaching Fellow _____
   - Employed Part time off campus _____
   - Employed Full time off campus _____
   - Unemployed _____

9. Have you been a member of a student cohort, a group of students who are enrolled in the same courses at the same time, in a previous educational setting?  Yes _____  No _____
Potential Interview Questions – Round 1

What led you to pursue a doctoral degree in counseling?
Describe your experiences with the cohort group so far.
How do you view your own participation in the cohort?
What is easy about working with the cohort?
What do you find difficult about working with the cohort?
How would you describe your learning experiences so far?
What role do you expect your cohort group will play in your learning?
What are the benefits to you of working with a cohort on academic and clinical areas?
What are the disadvantages to you of working with your cohort on academic and clinical areas?
How would you describe your relationship with your cohort members?
Outside of school related topics what do you talk about with your cohort members?
What do you know about your cohort members?
Potential Interview Questions – Rounds 2 and 3

What is school like for you right now?
Tell me about your experiences with your cohort.
How do you view your own participation in the cohort?
How would you describe your learning experiences?
How would you describe your learning experiences within your cohort?
What role does your cohort play in your learning?
How would you describe your relationships with your cohort members?
In what settings do you interact with cohort members?
Outside of school related topics, what do you talk about with your cohort members?
What do you know about your cohort members?
COMPREHENSIVE REFERENCE LIST


