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Why Hyperbonding Occurs in the Learning Community Classroom and What To Do About It

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Abstract

Hyperbonding can be a disruptive force in the learning community classroom characterized by non-productive student behaviors. Research has not identified how frequently hyperbonding occurs in learning communities or why. However, studies have begun to link hyperbonding to the presence of cohorts. I explain how cohorts form and develop, and how they may impact instructors teaching in learning community classrooms. I then discuss the ways instructor influence strategies coupled with a cohort presence may help to precipitate hyperbonding. Last, I turn to existing cohort literature in teacher education to identify what I believe are the most cogent recommendations to help prevent hyperbonding, which learning community instructors and directors can use to help manage and support their cohorts across learning community classes and programs.

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A productively functioning community of students and teachers is a worthy goal to aspire to, but of course, it is not a given…And there is no getting around it: putting students in several classes, and perhaps in a residence hall as well, sets up conditions for intense interpersonal dynamics, for better or worse. In fact, some learning community practitioners have come up with the term hyperbonding to refer to the behavior of certain groups of first-year students who become empowered around their own norms of immature behavior, sloppy work, and incivility.
~ Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick (2004, p. 102)

Hyperbonding can be a disruptive force in the learning community classroom characterized by non-productive student behaviors. Group absenteeism, disrespect shown toward the instructor, off-task conversations during lecture or lab time, inappropriate dominance over class discussions, and other unruly behaviors are some of the student conduct reported as typical of hyperbonding (LearningNotes, 2004; MacKinnon, 2006). Learning community instructors who experience hyperbonding indicate that classroom management is hampered, making it difficult to foster a positive learning environment (Dixon, 2004). For learning community instructors and directors, hyperbonding is particularly frustrating: their efforts to cultivate community among students seem to backfire, resulting in peer groups that disrupt rather than enrich learning. Learning community instructors and directors are keenly interested in understanding what causes hyperbonding and what can be done to prevent it.

While queries and discussions about hyperbonding have occurred in a variety of forums, from list-serves (Dixon, 2004) and editorials (Jaffee, 2004) to professional development sessions (Watts, 2011), empirical research has not identified how frequently hyperbonding occurs in learning communities or why. For example, we do not know whether hyperbonding occurs in all learning community programs, whether it occurs more frequently with less experienced instructors, or the ways residence life programming may affect hyperbonding. Accounts of hyperbonding tend to describe instructor experiences with the phenomenon in a single classroom (Darabi, 2006) or at one or two institutions (MacKinnon, 2006; Weissman, et al., 2011). Large-scale studies are needed to answer many of these questions. However, a body of scholarship aimed at discerning why hyperbonding occurs is growing.

Research has begun to link hyperbonding in learning communities to the presence of cohorts (Hubbell & Hubbell, 2010; Jaffee, 2007). Importantly, an established body of research primarily found in the teacher education area has investigated cohorts and classroom management for a number of years and can be used to inform this connection. This body of cohort research has analyzed

hyperbonding-like behaviors found in a variety of classrooms, including senior-level teacher education undergraduate cohorts (Mandzuk, Hasinoff, & Seifert, 2003), adult higher education programs, (Conrad, 2005) and graduate classrooms (McPhail, Robinson, & Scott, 2008). While the cohort-hyperbonding connection is promising, the mere presence of a cohort does not seem to guarantee the occurrence of hyperbonding (Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, & Adkison, 2011). Therefore, other factors must help to precipitate it.

I draw upon existing literature investigating cohorts to explain how cohorts form, develop and may impact instructors teaching in learning community classrooms. I then discuss the ways instructor influence strategies coupled with a cohort presence may help to precipitate hyperbonding. Last, I turn to existing cohort literature in teacher education to identify what I believe are the most cogent recommendations to help prevent hyperbonding, which learning community instructors and directors can use to help manage and support their cohorts across learning community classes and programs.

How cohorts form and develop in the learning community classroom

Instructors who teach cohorts argue that doing so is a very different experience than teaching a course without a cohort presence (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Beachboard, et al., 2011; Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010; Jaffee, 2007; Hubbell & Hubbell, 2010; Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001). This may be due in part because a cohort is a social entity that seems to exhibit a culture—members often establish rules for the cohort, adopt identifiable roles and may exert sway over others, including other members and even instructors (Donaldson & Scribner, 2003). As such, cohorts react to instructor influence differently and in ways that instructors may not fully understand or be prepared to manage.

The cohort's impact begins early, during its formation and development process, which often occurs before the first day of class. As Hubbell and Hubbell (2010) explain, in a non-cohort classroom, the instructor and students define their membership and roles fairly predictably, with the instructor often involved as a group leader:

> In the typical non-cohort class, the instructor plays a significant role during the forming stage. At this stage, most students are likely to sit back and quietly analyze their peers and assess their instructor. During the first few meetings of the class, the students are typically not members of a group, but instead are unrelated individuals. The instructor lays out his expectation for the course and implicitly plays a critical role in establishing the group culture. (Hubbell & Hubbell, 2010)

Cohort formation often occurs differently. Most important, the instructor usually is absent from involvement in the cohort's initial development (Hubbell & Hubbell, 2010). Many cohorts develop before they ever reach a particular course: students in the cohort already may have taken classes together or been involved in a residential life experience. This puts an instructor in an unusual position. During the first day of class, the instructor could be an outsider in his or her own classroom, obliged to interact with a cohort that already has formed "a culture of [its] own," and "a culture which the instructor may or may not feel comfortable with or even know about" (Hubbell & Hubbell, 2010). The cohort formation process may upend an instructor's customary strategies for helping to shape group culture in his or her class.

Cohorts are characterized by strong social bonds among members. Research shows that levels of "trust" and "a sense of cohesiveness" can be significantly higher in cohort groups than in non-cohort groups (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010, p. 371). Moreover, students who participate in learning community cohorts often have opportunities to bond socially beyond a single course or classroom experience (Domizi, 2008). Maher (2004) argues that an important indicator of a well developed cohort is "cohort agency," in which a student does not individuate but instead refers to the "we" of the cohort when describing him- or herself: "students began to describe their relationship with instructors in terms of 'we-they,' not 'I-he,' even when specifically asked, 'How would *you* describe *your* relationship with faculty members?'" (p. 21). Mandzuk and colleagues (2003) identify a similar characteristic, calling it the cohort's "collective identity" (p. 178).

Learning community practitioners often strive to achieve this type of cohort development. Indeed, creating a community of learners built on an effective network of peer support is a primary goal in the learning community classroom, and a well-developed cohort helps to facilitate this (Domizi, 2008; Phillips & Kim, 2009; Ross, Stafford, Church-Pupke, & Bondy, 2006). However, a tenuous balance exists between productive and non-productive cohort agency. Studies show that the presence of cohort agency may help to precipitate groupthink among members, negatively influencing students' critical thinking abilities and collaborative decision-making (Barnett et al., 2000; Donaldson & Scribner, 2003; Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010; Jaffee, 2007; Mandzuk et al., 2003). Cohort agency also has been shown to stymie the formation of other relationships beyond the cohort: "once significant bonding occurred among students … the students were less able or willing to form productive bonds outside of the cohort" (Beachboard et al., 2011, 869).

Cohorts often seem to cultivate student leaders, referred to as "high power students" in the cohort literature (Hubbell & Hubbell, 2010). Students who are "natural leaders" and more "socially oriented" seem to thrive in cohorts

(Mandzuk, et al., 2003, p. 181). Research indicates that "students with strong personalities" may wield significant influence in a cohort, possessing "the power to alter classroom dynamics" and the instructor's "impressions of the cohort as a whole" (Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001, p. 361). A student who attains a leadership role often serves as the spokesperson or "team voice" to the instructor, typically influencing the cohort's relationship with that instructor (Radencich, et al., 1998, p. 117). This influence can be fairly significant: "As instructors, we became aware that we were collectively referring to each of the cohorts by certain personality traits, which, upon reflection, were similar to those of the strongest members" (Mandzuk et al., 2003, p. 178).

In addition, once a student achieves a leadership role, cohort agency may make it more difficult for the cohort to re-assign that leadership to someone else or to challenge the student and his or her stance. In other words, cohort members often display little reflection about who should lead and why: "in some instances the cohort class adopts the attitudes and behaviors of the high-power students as their own without understanding how those attitudes and behaviors have been acquired by the high-power student" (Hubbell & Hubbell, 2010). In one cohort, its members were observed to follow an unspoken rule, which was to "deny leadership but permit control" in which cohort students perceived that all members were active in leading the group, when in fact control was assumed solely by two high-power students (Donaldson & Scribner, 2003, p. 657).

In summary, learning community instructors may be affected by the cohort presence in their classrooms in a number of different ways. Research indicates that instructors can be separated from the cohort's formation and development process. Thus, traditional strategies for cultivating a classroom group culture often are upended: "Indeed, rather than playing a major role in establishing the group culture, the students may expect the instructor to conform to their existing culture" (Hubbell & Hubbell, 2010). In addition, instructors also may struggle to manage cohort agency and the fairly complex group dynamics and student leadership structures that can accompany a cohort.

In the following section, I discuss the prevalence and importance of instructor influence strategies in the college classroom, examining the ways these strategies may help to motivate students and promote learning. To my point, I argue that influence strategies that are communicated effectively in a conventional classroom may not be as successfully communicated in the cohort classroom. As such, I believe that a strong cohort presence may leave some instructors with a more limited repertoire of influence strategies to use to communicate with students, which may hamper instructors' classroom management and help to precipitate hyperbonding in certain classrooms.

The importance of instructor influence strategies

Researchers who study instructor-student communication and social interactions in the classroom argue that these are key components in helping to determine students' motivation, learning, and academic success (Finn, 2011; Rausch & Crawford, 2012; Schrodt et al., 2008). A number of instructor-student interactions and communication strategies have been studied, ranging from the impact of teaching style (Coldren & Hively, 2009) and instructor immediacy behaviors (Goodboy & Myers, 2009) to responses to classroom incivility (Boice, 1996; Bray & Del Favero, 2004; Bjorkland & Rehling, 2010). A related area of study examines the influence strategies that instructors use, how students react to these strategies, and which seem to best cultivate student motivation and learning.

Is the classroom—cohort or otherwise—always a site of influence strategies being communicated and accepted (or not accepted) by instructors and by students? While not all instructors may agree, communication researchers acknowledge this to be so, contending that many forms of instructor and student communication that occur in the classroom are rooted in influence strategies. Importantly, studies investigating influence in the classroom also analyze how students communicate influence. Researchers examining post-secondary classrooms have shown that students often are "active agents of persuasion" (Golish & Olson, 2000, p. 294). Students' verbal and non-verbal communication may impart influence on fellow students and instructors (Mottet, Beebe, Raffeld, & Paulsel, 2005). Moreover, *cohort* students may have access to more powerful influence strategies: Sidelinger, Bolen, Frisby, & McMullen (2012) found that strong "student-to-student connectedness" in the classroom was more likely to precipitate influence and ultimately instructor compliance (p. 301).

The first in a series of studies about influence strategies began with McCroskey and Richmond (1983), speech communication researchers at West Virginia University, who argued that instructor influence was a form of verbal and non-verbal communication, and as such its effectiveness could only be measured by students' acceptance of it—that is, their willingness to be influenced. Thus, they claimed that authority in the classroom was not centered with the instructor and directed at students but rather was shared between instructor and students in much the same way that any communication activity is shared between its communicator and audience.

McCroskey and Richmond argued that instructors drew from definable bases of power while attempting to communicate influence. The French and Raven (1968) bases of power that they utilized are still recognized today in organizational and leadership communication. Two bases—*coercive* and *reward* power—use the threat of punishment or reward to attempt to garner influence. *Legitimate* power is assigned through role; the role of instructor comes with the

expectation that certain requests will be made, tasks will be assigned, and so forth. *Expert* power also is assigned, based on whether or not students perceive the instructor to be knowledgeable and expert in his or her subjects. *Referent* power is operative only when students are able to identify with the instructor: "When students admire the teacher or perceive them as a person with whom they wish to be associated, they may naturally be more receptive to the teacher's influence and suggestions" (Schrodt, et al. 2008, p. 182).

For over thirty years, researchers have investigated the use of these bases in the classroom, examining which are most influential and why, and which may be tied to productive student motivation and learning and why. Studies show that influence communicated through coercive or legitimate power bases are less likely to sway university students (Richmond, 1990). That is, students are less willing to be influenced through threat of punishment or through instructor role (e.g., you must do this because I am the instructor). In general, researchers argue that drawing from other more prosocial power bases (reward, expert, referent) is desirable (Teven & Herring, 2005).

In fact, studies indicate that those instructors who attempt to cultivate a productive and respectful relationship with students may help to encourage student motivation and learning: "While the development of positive student affect toward the teacher does not guarantee the subsequent cognitive and affective learning of the student, the results of the research in this series of studies certainly indicates it makes that outcome much more likely" (Richmond, 1990, p. 194). Subsequent research validates this claim: "In order to effectively inform and persuade students, then, behaviors that confirm students' identities, build rapport, and facilitate interpersonal relationship appear desirable" (Turman & Schrodt, 2006, p. 266). Recent research also has shown that when instructors communicate with students using prosocial behaviors and messages (*e.g.*, using eye contact, knowing student names, encouraging student questions) students also perceive that their instructors understand them. This perception of understanding is an "essential component of relationships" and helps to suggest a "high-quality or positive teacher-student relationship" (Finn, 2011, p. 70).

Studies indicate that building constructive relationships between instructors and students may help to foster student learning. Micari and Pazos (2012) examined a college-level organic chemistry class and analyzed the impact that the student-instructor relationship had on performance in this highly challenging course. They found a correlation between a positive student-professor relationship and a student's higher course grade and greater confidence in his/her ability to do well in the course (p. 45). That is, students who reported a positive instructor relationship not only had more confidence in their ability to do well but also earned higher grades. Related to this, Schrodt and his colleagues (2008) found that when instructors communicated influence from a referent power base,

students' own perceptions of learner empowerment were enhanced. Learner empowerment occurs when students not only "feel motivated to perform tasks but possess a level of control over those tasks (p. 183-184). Thus, students' willingness to be influenced through a referent power base—in that they identify with the instructor—seems to impact motivation and potentially even performance in a course. The study by Schrodt and his colleagues (2008) involved over 1,400 students and seems to demonstrate the importance of this type of relationship building:

> When instructors communicate from a referent base of power, when they demonstrate commitment to the class by being authentic and genuine, and when they build rapport with the class by relating to students in an open and approachable manner, such behaviors are likely to engender students' feelings of competence and self-efficacy in completing course material. The use of referent power and enabling students to see things from the instructor's perspective are also likely to enhance students' perceptions of the meaningfulness of course content and create an environment where students see the impact of their efforts on the learning process. (p. 194)

I argue that both the presence of a cohort and the use of instructor influence strategies may be relevant to the occurrence of hyperbonding in the learning community classroom. Specifically, certain influence strategies that instructors use successfully in non-cohort classrooms may *not* communicate the same influence to cohort students. Cohorts tend to form and develop differently than other classroom groups, and cohorts seem to cultivate cohort agency and high-power students more readily than groups found in non-cohort learning environments. Cohort students may not be willing to be influenced by instructors in the same ways as they would if they were members of a non-cohort classroom.

As such, instructors may be left with a more limited repertoire of influence strategies when teaching a cohort. For instance, instructors in non-cohort classes may routinely draw from a referent power base and cultivate students' identification with them through prosocial behaviors and strategies. However, this referent influence strategy may not be communicated as effectively with cohort students, who may be less able to identify and form a relationship with their instructor. For instance, in their study of over 230 teacher education students, Mandzuk and his colleagues (2003) found that many of these cohort students were challenged to form relationships with students and instructors beyond the cohort. Using the lens of social capital theory, they argued that students displayed difficulty "bridging," and overall they argued, "the many challenges of student cohorts were attributable to too much bonding and not enough bridging" (p. 180).

If students are unwilling or unable to bridge and identify with the instructor, the instructor may be hard pressed to communicate influence drawing from a referent power base. In addition, if instructors' influence strategies are met with resistance, instructors may revert to using another type of strategy or power base, even an antisocial one, to attempt to communicate influence.

In summary, communicating influence appears to be an important feature of instructor-student interactions, student motivation and learning. In some instances, effectively communicating influence seems to be complicated (not eased) by the presence of a well-developed cohort. For this reason, the ways in which instructors attempt to communicate influence may play a part in the presence of hyperbonding in the cohort classroom. The effects of instructor influence strategies on cohorts has not been studied extensively, yet this area of investigation deserves more attention as we do not yet know which power bases cohort students may be more receptive to and how these could affect their motivation and learning. Until then, learning community instructors need to rely on recommendations from cohort literature, which is primarily found in the teacher education area, to help prevent hyperbonding before it starts. In the following section, I review this literature and identify what I believe are the most cogent recommendations that learning community instructors and directors can use to help prevent hyperbonding in their classrooms and programs.

Recommendations

Currently, many of the recommendations aimed at preventing hyperbonding are good teaching rules-of-thumb, but they do not address the underlying issues specific to hyperbonding identified here. For example, Jaffee's (2004) advice to instructors to "depart from the 'sage on stage' model of lecturing, emphasize students' active learning [and] encourage extended class discussions" is pedagogically sound. However, how can an instructor "encourage extended class discussions" if these discussions are peppered with students' off-topic conversations? Similarly, how can an instructor "emphasize students' active learning" if students display unruly behaviors, disrespect or group absenteeism? In other words, general strategies like these may not work as effectively unless they are preceded with recommendations to help instructors understand and communicate influence with cohorts.

Several studies from the teacher education area that investigate cohorts provide useful advice for doing so (Bentley, Zhao, Reames, & Reed, 2004; Carbone, 1999; Maher, 2005; Meyers, 2009; Teitel, 1997). I analyzed this literature and synthesized the most relevant recommendations into three themes: collaborate, reflect/direct, and engage.

Collaborate

Learning community instructors often face a challenge because the cohorts populating their classrooms may already have formed and developed as groups with little initial input from the instructors. This feature of cohort development can leave instructors at a disadvantage. On the first day of classes, instructors may not know what roles students have adopted for themselves, what student leaders have emerged, what rules the cohort follows, what they value, and so forth. This "not knowing" means that instructors initially are not collaborators with the student groups that populate their classes.

The following set of recommendations aims to re-insert instructors as collaborators into the cohort—thereby helping to shape its roles, rules and culture. These recommendations are by no means exhaustive, and learning community instructors and directors certainly may use other strategies. The point is that learning community instructors need to seek out ways to collaborate with the cohort early in its formation and development—perhaps even before the first day of classes. Importantly, learning community directors may need to find ways for instructors to come together early in the cohort formation stage to actually enact recommendations like these.

- *Review student portfolios.* Encourage students to self-report their skills and experiences by building a portfolio of coursework that characterizes their abilities and performance, and by circulating it to cohort instructors prior to the beginning of each semester (Bentley, et al., 2004). A portfolio also could prompt student reflection about their contributions to the cohort, helping to increase "self-awareness and group-awareness" (Bentley et al., 2004, p. 42).

- *Assign an advocate.* Assign each cohort an "advocate," a learning community instructor or peer mentor to serve as an intermediary between faculty and cohort, communicating to new instructors about the cohort's history and qualities (Teitel, 1997).

- *Develop a cohort charter.* Early in the cohort experience, members could work with an instructor or advocate to develop guidelines for a charter (Teitel, 1997). This charter could provide defined rules for students and faculty to follow specific to participation, responsibilities, and behavior. The charter also gives someone besides cohort members an early opportunity to help develop its rules and student roles.

These recommendations are meant to help instructors collaborate more productively with cohorts. Having students develop and circulate a portfolio of their work not only helps instructors to learn more about individual students' personalities, skills and experiences, but it also provides students with a chance to capture what they have learned and what they need to learn. While assigning an advocate to each cohort may be too demanding fiscally or logistically for some learning communities, it may be particularly beneficial for those cohorts that involve many courses or schedule multi-year cohort experiences, helping to communicate the history and progress of that group to several instructors. The charter not only engages instructors with cohort formation and development but also acknowledges the complexity of cohort group dynamics, leadership and rule-making, hopefully setting the scene for many productive discussions about these issues to come.

Reflect/Direct

Once cohorts form and develop, cohort agency and the emergence of one or two high-power students can occur. Without some instructor input, cohort agency can devolve into groupthink, and high-power students may jeopardize productive collaboration and decision-making. Certain influence strategies used successfully by instructors in non-cohort classrooms may not communicate the same influence to cohort students. Ideally, the "collaborate" strategies above would have been enacted and instructors should have a sense of their cohort, its culture, values, and so forth by the first day of classes. Once in class, though, cohort instructors need to strategize ways to harness the collaborative power of the group and help direct its members into productive teamwork and leadership practices.

This "reflect/direct" set of recommendations is meant to occur during the semester and helps to provide time for student reflection and discussion specific to cohort participation. Additionally, these recommendations are meant to help instructors direct student collaboration and leadership practices.

- *Assign time for guided student reflection/discussion.* Instructors should try to assign time during the semester for guided student reflection and discussion about cohort policies, responsibilities and behaviors. In doing so, students could "debrief" about the cohort, helping instructors to better recognize "unproductive group patterns or student roles" and to determine ways to make these more effective (Maher, 2005).
- *Assign a group project.* Assigning a group project provides an opportunity for students to practice interacting, assigning tasks, and discussing concepts and decision-making in a group setting, with guided advice and structure provided by the instructor (Bentley, et al., 2004; Jaffee, 2004).

The group project can offer students explicit opportunities to reflect and analyze on their collaboration and to help them become active, productive agents in the cohort.

- *Provide instructor opportunities to connect*. Provide cohort instructors (past, present, and future) with opportunities to interact and discuss cohort dynamics, teaching ideas and assignments, pedagogy, and the like. Such opportunities could be a part of existing professional development or programming.

The "reflect/direct" recommendations are meant to create opportunities for teachable moments during cohort instruction. Assigning a group project during the semester gives students a tangible way to practice engaging in productive collaboration and leadership strategies, guided by the instructor. Assigning time during the semester for student reflection and discussion about cohort practices, values, challenges and benefits not only may complement the learning objectives of the group project but also may help to cultivate a healthy cohort, giving the instructor opportunities to help guide it. If possible, connecting cohort instructors during the semester to discuss pedagogy and the cohort itself can be time well spent. Having opportunities to share assignment and activity ideas, to discuss experiences with students, and to set long- and short-term goals for the cohort can be valuable for instructors and ultimately for their students.

Engage

Cohort research as well as scholarship in other areas of teaching and learning recommend that instructors find ways to engage productively with students. Specifically, cohort research and studies examining instructor-student communication in the classroom indicate that taking a prosocial approach to interacting and communicating with students can be effective. Prosocial strategies and behaviors encourage students (rather than demeaning or punishing them) and are fairly wide-ranging—everything from instructors learning each student's name to using eye contact and generally behaving and communicating in ways that help to endorse students' value.

Engaging with students using a prosocial approach can be useful in a cohort classroom for a number of reasons. First, prosocial techniques and messages encourage instructors to individualize students, helping them to recognize "the uniqueness of each learner" (Guiliar and Loring 2008, 30). Individualizing students may be especially useful for cohort instructors in that it may help to combat the ill effects of cohort agency. Second, research shows that students tend to reciprocate prosocial behaviors: "If instructors use prosocial strategies, their

students are likely to respond in kind" (Baker, Meyer, & Hunt, 2005, 42). This reciprocity can become systemic, working its way from instructor to student and throughout the cohort. Third, prosocial strategies have been shown to positively impact student motivation to learn (Richmond, 1990). Fourth, instructors' use of prosocial behaviors and techniques also have been found to impact effective classroom management, reducing instances of classroom incivilities such as tardiness, leaving class early, or off-topic conversing during lecture or lab time (Carbone, 1999; Meyers, 2009). When instructors responded early with "positive motivators and strong immediacies" (Boice, 1996, p. 471) such as "warmth and approachability" (484), uncivil behaviors remained fairly low throughout the semester. Prosocial messages and strategies can be used by cohort instructors to engage productively with students, individualizing them and helping to promote an environment of respect and civility.

Conclusion

Renewed attention should be given to the effect that cohorts have on instructors' influence strategies and the influence that cohorts themselves are capable of wielding and why. Helping instructors to connect early and often with cohorts is one key to prevent hyperbonding; learning community instructors and directors should work together to collaborate, reflect/direct, and engage cohort students.

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