

Running Head: Millennials

"Millennials"

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Ready or Not: Adult Education and Millennial Generation

The Millennial generation is presenting challenges and opportunities to education generally and adult education particularly. Adult education, with the growth of technology and the array of choices seems, at first glance to be particularly well matched to the needs of this rising generation, with numbers that nearly match that of Baby Boomers. However this generation appears to have well defined expectations of education, and theories of andragogy may not necessarily be adequate to the task of meeting this generation's needs. Adult education has been through changes before, and should be in a position to adapt. Given the growth and professionalization of adult education, with an emphasis on standardized formats particularly in online classes (such as Web CT based curriculums) the challenge will be keeping up with student expectations.

There was a time, which seems almost quaint now, when adult education was viewed as a specialized field, not in the

mainstream of education. Adult educators were arguably marginalized out of the Academe, and adult students were put into set categories: high school drop outs trying to get a certificate or diploma, students trying to attain vocational training, or people seeking life enrichment (Jarvis, Griffen, (2003). This was the state of things in the 1960's. But the culture was changing fast with the onslaught of the baby boomers, who by their sheer numbers, attitudes and aspirations shaped all aspects of social and economic life, including education. Malcolm Knowles refined a theory of androgogy as Baby Boomers came of age. Knowles developed a theory that is compelling and seems to reflect the aspirations of this generation. However, does the andragogy theory of Knowles and other adult education researchers still apply to the generation now coming of age, the so-called Generation Y or Millennials? Using an ecological framework, this paper will compare and contrast prior generations of adults learners with current learners, examine assumptions about Millennials, while linking principles of andragogy to the needs of this generation.

Andragogy

Adult Education theories have focused on the following concepts: a) student centered learning b) empowerment c) critical reflection. Building on the seminal work of Thorndike and associated scholars in the 1920's, Knowles was able to

identify effective approaches to teaching adults based on the characteristics and needs of adults. Thorndike and other educators had been influenced by the current psychology, a behaviorial model, as a way to understand how people learn which was in turn influenced by science and industry. Eventually researchers began to notice that not only could adults learn, but they perhaps learn differently than children (Merriman, 2005).

Knowles identified the following characteristics of adult learning (Merriman, 2005).

1. Learning moves from dependency to self-directedness
2. Learning is rooted in experience
3. Learning is linked to social roles
4. Learning changes from delayed learning to fast application and subject focus to performance.

Knowles did not look at andragogy and pedgagogy as being exclusive, but as part of a continuum. Knowles was prescient in seeing that education was changing rapidly in term of systems, delivery, and technology, seeing a time when education would not be constrained by time or place (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990).

Jack Mezirow was interested in how learning has the power to change individuals. Mezirow looked at three domains of learning: a) task, work related b) interpersonal and interactive understanding and c) emancipatory, which is self-reflective and

leading to transformation; as perspective is change meaning is changed (Merriman, 1999 and Imel, S, 1998). Stephen Brookfield was also interested in learning that induces change and critical reflection, and addressed findings that show adult cognition and social interaction and personality is dynamic, experiential, with expertise gained through practice (2005).

Baby Boomer Characteristics and Environment

Characteristics

At the time Knowles was researching adult education in the 1960's and 70's baby boomers were growing and beginning to take on adult roles. The size of this generation has generated a cottage industry among business, media, academics with a surfeit of studies, examinations, articles of the baby boomers. Hicks and Hicks covered this ground in a book that explores generational differences and influences, with an emphasis on popular culture and shared cultural values and attitudes of a generation. The Boomer generation is described by Hicks and Hicks in stark contrast to their parents, as consumerist, permissive morality, and wanting instant gratification.

Other descriptions of this generation include optimistic, process oriented, and an appreciation for convenience (Dziuban, Moskal & Hartman,). Boomers grew up in a time of disorienting and polarizing events, with the assassination of JFK and MLK, Viet Nam War, the growth of divorce, and rise of civil rights and

growth of suburbia. Communications technology continued to grow and influence life, and mass communication and technology (television, computers, fax machines) shaped this generation and overall society. This generation also came of age at a time when public education, from elementary through college was considered to be important and expected (Trow, 1999). Revealingly, a recent Pew Survey (2009) reviewed significant feelings of foreboding and disappointment among this group, which belies the image of optimism.

Education Environment

The Post War era saw robust growth and changes in American education. There was a significant increase in student enrollment in universities and colleges. The statistics from 1972 - 1982 (as Boomers came of age) are particularly telling in terms of adult education. Most of the growth was among those 25 and older, with 35 years and older with 77% and 25 to 34 a 70% increase, as compared to 35% overall increase in student enrolments. During this same period, there was also two-third increase in female students and a remarkable increase of 85% of minority students. Another telling change during this period was the change from grants to loans as a source of support. In 1975 loans were 21% of student support, by 1984 loans provided 66% support (Trow, 1999). Education became increasingly specialized,

with education purpose divided between research, teaching, liberal arts and vocational studies (Rice, 1999).

During the 1960's there federal and state level legislation ramped up funding for vocational education, benefiting both community colleges and proprietary schools (Hittman, 1999).

Socioeconomic environment

Boomers grew up in a time of prosperity and stable economic circumstances, with movement to suburban living. At this point, many families could still afford a one-income household. Later boomers (born mid-50's to mid-60's) experienced changes, with increase in divorce rates and mothers having to go to work (Patterson, 2007).

Technology and Learning Environment

While technology was playing an increasingly important role in the 60's, 70's and 80's, most teaching was done in a classroom environment, and use of technology was supportive to teaching, such as slides, films, and overhead projectors. Distanced education was still mail, television or radio. As evidenced by Knowles and Mezirow's work during this period, an important shift was beginning to taking place during this period. Barr and Tagg summarize this shift neatly: in the old paradigm, college was a place to "provide instruction", now it was becoming a place to "produce learning", reflecting an increasingly consumerist society.

Television was a dominant medium in lives of boomers and their parents, bringing the news into living rooms, sometimes in a shocking and graphic way (JFK assassination, Vietnam) and bringing the consumer culture to full flower. Even as events created a feeling of disorder and chaos, and some boomers (and for that matter, older adults) rebelled there remained a sense of authority, and knowledge as something that could be attained.

Millennials Characteristics and Environment

Characteristics

Recently there has been a spate of writing in popular and academic press about Millennials (or Generation Y). Millennials are defined as the generation born approximately 1980 to 1995, or in some resources 2002 (years vary depending on source). This is also a large cohort, at over 80 million, which matches or exceeds the size of the baby boomer generation (Pew Research 2008). It is important for adult educators (many of who are baby boomers) to consider and understand characteristics of Millennials. This generation, according to Oblinger, enjoy group activity, retain close relationships with parents, do more homework and housework and less TV watching, take pride in being smart, are attracted to technology, and are quite ethnically diverse (2003).

Some have remarked on this generation's expectations and sense of entitlement. Being goal oriented, they are willing to

accept as much help and support to achieve success (McGlynn, 2005). Once again, these summaries of generational characteristics should be viewed as summaries and do not necessarily reflect individual differences. What can be taken away from this list is an interesting combination of traditionalism (parental respect and family ties) with a comfort level with diverse technology. In fact Oblinger (2003) notes that this generation does not look at computers as "technology" but a natural part of life. Understanding this attitude may be difficult for educators who may still be trying to absorb and adapt to new technology.

As a generation, Millennials experienced such public events as the Columbine shooting, Desert Storm, and a presidential impeachment. They tend to be positive, practical, and appreciate structure and schedules as a way to cope with busy lives (Journal of College Admission).

Sweeney (2006) suggests that Millennials may have some striking personality differences with Generation X students, although the evidence is based on limited study. However, the results of a study of Northwestern Ohio College of Medicine students is interesting in terms of figuring out effective instructional strategies. This study showed that students tended to have more abstract reasoning ability, were warm, outgoing, adaptive and mature, rule conscious, more bold and

adventuresome, sensitive and apprehensive, open to change and experimentation organized and self disciplined and less solitary and individualistic.

Education Environment

From a personal standpoint, Millennials have grown up in a more regulated (for safety reasons) and test oriented (NCLB) school environment. From a systems level, there has been tremendous change in education as Millennials have come of age, change which reflects an increasingly consumerist, individualized, and privatized economic philosophy as well as more choices in learning institutions. Ability or access to funding education is an increasing concern. Technology, with the growth of online education (in a hybrid or completely online format) has brought new opportunities and challenges for educators, and has enabled spectacular growth among non-traditional proprietary schools. Adult education has expanded beyond specialized vocational providers to creditable sources of advanced degrees in a range of fields.

Socioeconomic Environment

The trends that late boomers had begun to experience, with divorce and the economic requirement of a two-income household came to fruition for Millennials. For example, in 1972 three out of four children grew up in a two-parent household, by 1998 only half of children grew up in two parent households (Standfort,

2002). In spite of this, Millennials are often described as closely connected to their parents, who wield substantial influence over their decisions.

Technology and Learning Environment

The access to technology and reliance on testing, which encourages rote learning, presents both opportunities and challenges for educators. Having grown up around an array of communication technologies (such as cell phones with text messaging) these students may have a habit of multi-tasking and therefore shorter attention spans. The emphasis on testing and focus on facts may result in less critical thinking skills. These students are used to being assessed, and prefer clear goals and feedback. They have developed skills in teamwork, creating social networks (albeit electronically) and organization (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007). Some Millennials have had more sophisticated technology at home than at school, and may reasonably believe they have better grasp of technology than their parents or teachers.

They prefer learning that is oriented to groups and problem solving (Junginger, 2007). Because of technology, Millennials are used to learning in an associative, chunky, non-linear style, and are able to combine different information in new ways (rappers sampling songs is an example of this) (Dede, 2004). These students are exposed to a diverse variety of media in

which to learn, and prefer visual and audio learning, with a focus on activity and achievement (Sanders, 2006).

A revealing series of focus groups by Sweeney (2006) showed that students rarely read books, write handwritten letters, communicate electronically with friends, and frequently use YouTube and other applications. Students also shared they don't necessarily prefer online classes, and enjoy in person classes if the instruction is engaging, active and not a "boring lecture". Some students did not like online because responses were too slow. Students expect organization and compelling engagement whether it is online or in the classroom. Many in this generation grew up in gaming and thrive on this stimulation.

Adult Education: What Now?

Andragogy has emphasized self-directed learning, critical reflection, social roles and transformation. There has been an inherent democratic quality to andragogy, which is both pragmatic (providing opportunities for adults to seek their vocation and try new ventures in life-long learning) and idealistic (you can make your dreams come true). Rooted in progressive concepts of John Dewey, truth was not archived, but something to be continually discovered (Noddings, 2007). In an era of information overload it is easy to make the case for critical thinking.

At first glance the growth in adult education, particularly through distance education programs seems to be well timed and well matched to this linked-in generation. Adult education also provides a range of choices that would appear to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population. But adult educators need to be cautious in making assumptions.

Assumption One: Millennial students prefer online education, because they are comfortable with an array of technology, so adult education should prefer to focus on this direction.

Millennials students have high expectations for a learning environment, no matter if it's by computer or in person. The key is interactivity, whether it on computer or in class. They need the feeling of connection and feedback, and they want this quickly (Barone, N.D. and Ramaley & Zia, N.D.). While older adults have turned to distance education out of necessity Millennials often prefer interaction of groups, and the active support of instructors, which is harder to find in the less personal environment of distance education (McNelley, N.D.) This does not mean that online courses will not benefit these learners, it simply means that online courses need to stimulate and engage a generation that grew up on gaming and multi media tools.

Assumption Two: Technology is most important aspect of their lives and education.

This is a generation that feels comfortable creating their own presence on the web, with YouTube, MySpace and make use of multiple applications. Student attitudes toward technology is also important. Millennials do not look at their devices as technology unless it is something they don't understand, i.e. cell phones are *not* technology, applications are activities, *not* technology. Technology is something that is in the background of their lives. They also expect technology to be adapted to their needs, not the other way around (Oblinger & Oblinger, N.D. and Roberts, N.D.) In essence, technology should be used effectively, appropriately, and to its maximum potential so that students can be engaged and stimulated.

Assumption Three: Millennials are passive learners who get through school by memorizing facts and taking tests.

It is true that this generation grew up with an emphasis on standards and accountability, although at the same time academic theorists were espousing the need for critical thinking. There seems to be a yawning gap between reality of what happening in primary and secondary education and the expectation that students will suddenly become critical thinkers. However, Millennials use of computer technology has turned them into experiential learners who prefer learning by doing, and often, by creating (McNelley, N.D.). This happens to fit in well with

constructivist theory, and over arching goals of adult education that encourages student centered, discovery learning.

Assumption Four: Student do not respect expertise, because they are so immersed in popular culture, and easy access to information.

A sample poll of students at the University of Pittsburg says otherwise, with students wanting their professors to be passionate and knowledgeable, and also able to make good use of technology. This poll also showed that students preferred a teaching environment that evenly balanced lecture with interativity (Roberts, N.D). What this means for andragogy is that students are capable of learning multiple ways - they can direct their learning, they thrive with teamwork, and respond well to the support and knowledge of instructors.

Assumption Four: Technology leads to isolative and multi-tasking behavior and lack of interpersonal communications, Millennials are in their own technology driven world, which impairs ability to learn.

Current Internet based applications that youth use have an emphasis on social networking. While educators may judge this as being superficial from their perspective, from an andragoical perspective it is important to "start where the client is". For reasons that may be that may be driven by rapid changes in society, in family, work, school, and growth of technology,

students prefer learning that emphasizes teamwork, structure, and engagement with social connections. Moreover, interpersonal communications is not defined as "in person" and technology enhances, not interferes with communications. Text messaging is synonymous with talking (Oblinger and Oblinger, N.D. and Roberts, N.D.).

Assumption Five: Millenium students don't read, and so can't learn, and this creates obstacles in traditional and online classes.

Research has showed that Millenium learners (aka Net Gen) avoid large amount of texts, which is likely too passive and perceived as a time waster. Their exposure to interactive web sites (and for that matter gaming) means they respond better to text in a graphically rich environment. For andragogy, the emphasis should be on concepts, and giving Millenium students the opportunity for inductive discovery, develop hypothesis in an interactive manner that is visual and kinesthetic (Oblinger and Oblinger, N.D.).

Assumption Five: Millenium students are so much into entertainment and technology they do not care about the world around them.

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, Millenium learners want to be actively engaged in their communities, and care about things that matter. A report, from the Center for Information

and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and other sources show that while students do not necessarily trust the spin from media and politicians they are interested in working to help improve their communities. Research also shows that college makes a significant difference in youth engagement in civic affairs, with non-college student being less likely to participate in community activities (CivicYouth, 2009). This interest also fits in well with andragogical principles of transformational and action oriented learning, and for that matter effective problem solving, which ideally employs both experience and critical thinking (Brookfield, 2005).

As this demonstrates, it is important that adult educators not make superficial assumptions about Millennial students. This is not to say that these andragogical principles no longer have merit. As Millennials become adults, it is difficult to believe that they would not want to feel, in Knowles words, "accepted, respected, and supported" and that there should be a "spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers", (Brookfield, p. 29, 2005). These concepts of andragogy appear to mesh well with this generations need for social connections and improvement at both the personal and community level.

Andragogy does not need to abandon principles developed by Knowles, and other theorists, but in the spirit of Millennials, to add and elaborate on this framework for understanding of how

adults learn. It is a given that Millennials will someday dominate adult education as students and then teachers. Frand summarizes the views of this generation: Computers are not technology, the Internet is more important than television, reality is not always what it appears to be, that doing is preferred to knowing, learning is akin to the trial and error of a video game, multi-tasking is life, typing is a given over handwriting, responses must be immediate, and there is little distinction between creator and consumer (Oblinger, 2003).

The implication for adult education and andragogy is to build on the foundational principles of Knowles, Mezirow, Brookfield and others (including John Dewey). It is not a matter of choosing between online or in class learning, individual, self-directed learning or reliance on expertise. There is also additional challenge for adult education: to simultaneously serve the needs of multiple generations, which include many non-traditional part time students (Oblinger and Oblinger.). Malcolm Knowles's principles of self-direction, experiential learning, social roles, fast application and performance still apply, and can be easily integrated in to the needs of the Millennial generation.

Imagine a future in which learning is truly multi-dimensional and multi-functional. Far out sounding technology like virtual reality and holograms might be part of this. The

Internet already shows great multi-media possibilities when done correctly (such as the National Geographic site or BBC site, which use text, photos, videos, streaming, sound). But instead of thinking of future learning as leading toward one direction, such as more tech oriented, it is probably better to view it as multidirectional, with personal and social goods. Technology and globalization have already transformed the world; learning provides the tools to respond and take a hold of this transformation.

Successful and effective adult education will need to be prepared to be flexible, interactive, creative, responsive, fast, socially engaged, adaptable, supportive, challenging and varied. Its not about the technology, its about the need to learn and understand. It's time to refresh, reset, and retool as necessary for this potentially exciting next stage.

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