Best Practices for Adult Educators Working in Cross-Generational Learning Spaces

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Abstract: This paper outlines findings from a collaborative research project on working with cross-generational groups of child welfare workers. Best practices for working with cross-generational groups are provided.[i]

Keywords: cross-generational, Millennials, workforce

Background

The Center for Development of Human Services (CDHS) delivers high-quality, outcome-based training and technical support throughout New York State to an average of 60,000 participants and program area stakeholders each year. As the child welfare workforce is changing, with workers from four generations currently learning and working together, a need to better understand each of the generations, Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials, was identified. Further, it was noted that it is not enough to understand each individual generation. Program planners, curriculum writers and trainers must understand how to educate cross-generational groups together.

The Collaborative Research Institute at State University of New York (SUNY) Buffalo, which develops working relationships between faculty at SUNY and the staff of the CDHS Institute for Community Health Promotion, created a "match" research project to fill this need: "Cross Generational Learning Styles in Child Welfare Training." This match project supported a literature review of generational groups and best practices for working in cross-generational learning spaces.

In the United States and across the globe adult education learning spaces include students spanning multiple generations. Members of these generations bring a wealth of unique life experiences and perspectives with them when they work and learn. Generational differences have the power to impact student learning preferences, with important implications for adult educators.

Generational Groups

Generational groups are created when people are born during a similar time period and experience major economic, political, technological and/or world events together. Four major generational groups currently participate in adult and workplace education in the United States, as follows (see Bussin & Rooy, 2014; Coulson, 2009; Costonis, 2011; Fry, 2015; Giacomarro, 2013; Hardison, 2011; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; McGlynn, 2005; Schlitzkus, Schenarts, & Schenarts, 2009; Schurr, 2007).

Traditionalists: Born 1928-1945

Members of the oldest and most experienced group, the "Traditionalists" or "Silents," tend to share a traditional view of education and work. They are viewed as loyal and disciplined, and often find the work itself to be the reward. As most Traditionalists are aging out of the workplace, many seek adult education opportunities strictly for personal fulfillment.

Traditionalists did not grow up with technology and may be the most challenged by technological advancements.

Baby Boomers: Born 1946-1964

Baby Boomers were born after World War II and are seen as loyal and hardworking. Many currently hold leadership positions within organizations. They seek learning opportunities in order to stay competitive in an uncertain economic climate and to overcome any perceived limitations

associated with age. Boomers tend to be competitive and appreciate public recognition for their accomplishments. As with Traditionalists, Boomers did not grow up with technology and are, in general, less naturally adept at its use.

Generation X: Born 1965-1980

Gen Xers – part of the "Me" generation- are in the early to middle stages of their careers and many are rising to leadership positions. A lot of Xers find themselves faced with challenges associated with caring both for younger children and aging parents. Thus, they place a high value on work-life balance. Xers are viewed as independent and committed to challenging the status quo. Some authors use the term "cynical" to describe members of this group.

Millennials: Born 1981-1997

Members of the youngest group, known as "Millennials," are the most technologically savvy generation. Considered "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) this generation was the first to live their entire life connected to digital devices and the Internet. Due to this experience, Millennials learn new technology easily and often show a strength and preference for multitasking. They grew up using new forms of media and have been shaped by new forms of communication. Many prefer not to use textbooks or other traditional academic materials and embrace alternative information sources. They tend to view organizational structures as "flat" and are not comfortable with hierarchy.

Millennials were children during the 9/11 attack and grew up during the war on terror. They witnessed the inauguration of the first Black president and a new era of LGBTQ civil rights. They are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in history. Millennials largely share a globalized view of a world with few boundaries.

Some research has indicated that Millennials expect special accommodations due to their "trophy for everyone" upbringing, but these findings are disputable. There is evidence that they appreciate clearly outlined objectives, request consistent and timely feedback from supportive supervisors and instructors, and thrive on accomplishing goals. Early research indicated that Millennials enjoy group work and learning activities. Members of the group are thought to have high self-esteem.

Generation Y

A separate smaller generation known as "Generation Y" is considered part of the larger Millennials generational group. Generation Y are the oldest of the Millennials and share some characteristics with Generation X. Weiler (2004) described Gen Ys as visual learners that enjoy dialogic instruction and hands-on activities.

Cuspers

In addition to the four main groups (Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials/Generation Y) are a group known as "cuspers." Cuspers were born at the end or beginning of one generation but share the experiences of another, thus they do not fit neatly into

a generational category (Johnson & Lopes, 2008). It is important to note that generational grouping is not a strict science and individual life experiences may play a greater role than experiences associated with a generational category.

The Current Educational Landscape

The National Center for Education Statistics (2016) projects that the number of students aged 25 and older who are enrolled in higher education will increase faster than traditional college-aged students during the next 20 years (2014-2024). Workplace education will also have to accommodate generational diversity. According to the Pew Research Center, more than one- third of workers in the United States are Millennials. These young employees join Generation X (34%), Baby Boomers (29%) and a small number of Traditionalists (2%) to create the most generationally diverse workforce in history (Fry, 2015). Global workforce trends indicate a similar pattern of age and generation diversification, as older workers remain in the global workforce up to and past retirement age and fewer younger workers enter[1] (SHRM Foundation, 2015).

Beyond formal education 73% of adults in the U.S. label themselves as "lifelong learners," engaging in a variety of non-formal and informal forms of adult education. While younger adults participate at the highest levels, a full 62% of adults aged 65 and older continue to participate in adult learning opportunities (Horrigan, 2016).

Comfort with Technology

Whitaker, Torrico Meruvia and Jones (2010) published results from a survey about mobile technology given to members of the National Association of Social Work Child Welfare Specialty Practice Section. Respondents were split into two groups: younger (35 years old and younger) and older (36 years old and older). From the findings, …social workers in child welfare seemed receptive to the use of mobile technology tools in the field. Both older and younger social workers valued connectivity to data and the Internet while in the field, and believed that technology could improve productivity among child welfare case workers. (p. 17)

While there were slight differences in confidence with tools (younger workers responded they were more confident), workers from both age groups saw the benefit of using mobile devices in the field. As this finding is outside of what may be assumed based on generational groupings, the authors caution, "As the workplace becomes more multigenerational, it will be important for social workers to be attentive to biases they may hold about other generations" (p. 17).

Best Practices for Working with Cross-Generational Groups

Extensive scholarship has been produced related to working with cross-generational (also known as multi-generational) groups of adults. A key facet of this work is the focus on creating learning spaces and workplaces that respect and value generational differences and allow each group to maximize its strengths (see Sánchez & Kaplan, 2014).

Consistent recommendations across literature include 1) finding ways to leverage the life experience of older learners and the technological skills of younger learners to create robust cross-generational learning communities, 2) providing two-way mentorship opportunities between older learners and Millennials, and 3) diversifying instruction to meet the needs of each

[1] Notable variations exist across continents and countries, including in Africa where the percentage of young workers entering the workforce remains high.

individual learner (for example see Boysen, Daste & Northern, 2016; Cekada, 2012; Helyer, & Lee, 2012; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010).

Child Welfare Recommendations

Torrico Meruvia (2013) wrote an article specific to the needs and concerns of the cross-generational child welfare workforce. She states, "Unaddressed, generational differences can not only increase stressors in the workplace, but they also have the potential to affect social workers' job satisfaction" (p. 1). She encourages supervisors to be aware of generational differences and understand potential sources of generation conflict, including the use of specific technologies and/or communication tools. Highlights of her recommendations follow.

"Foster cross-generational workforce teams." Great opportunities exist to leverage the strengths of multiple generations on workplace and training teams. Cross-generational teams and learning communities should be considered a plus.

- "Provide [cross-generational] mentoring opportunities among staff." Cross-generational mentoring was noted as a best practice across various research articles. The focus should be on two-way mentorship, where each party learns in the process.
- "Support a range of professional development opportunities [to meet the needs of all workers.]" Professional growth and development should be a focus of the workplace. Providing various types and forms of learning is the best practice.
- "Accommodate different learning [and communication] styles." As with the previous recommendation, providing a variety of different types of learning and communication methods will ensure that all employees' needs are met.
- "Keep employees engaged." Recognizing employee contributions and making certain employees of all generations feel valued is a key to success.
- "Do not confuse character issues with generational traits." Employees are individuals with individual behaviors and needs. Beyond any generational characteristic, supervisors and trainers must recognize each individual employee. Generational groupings should not be used to disregard employee needs or to excuse employee bad behavior.

(2013, pp. 3-5)

Edutainment

Junginger (2008) described the process needed to teach and train Millennials as "edutainment." He argues that this generation, "must be entertained while educated" (p. 20). This falls closely in line with best practices in adult education which reject traditional lecture in favor of active and experiential learning. All generations will likely benefit from a teaching and training approach which focuses on deep student engagement.

One approach that would likely fit into the category of edutainment is the use of simulation. Erlam (2014) recommends the use of simulation with Millennial undergraduate nursing students. Simulation and/or role play may be an appropriate tool to engage students in child welfare training.

While engaging students of all generations is important, Bonaduce and Quigley (2011) remind instructors not to lose sight of the subject matter. "However…we need to guard against losing the essence of the subject matter…because we are so heavily concentrating on delivering the lecture content via the latest technology in the classroom" (p. 158).

Future Directions

Research in the area of cross-generational learning should continue. As the "post-Millennial" (Fry, 2015) generation begins to enter adult education learning spaces, including child welfare work, stakeholders will need to learn about members of this group. Cogin (2012) argues that generational difference should be included in diversity training programs, "with the aim of building understanding of the differences between generations" (p. 2289).

Additionally, while researchers often focus efforts on the youngest group of adult learners, older adults should not be ignored. Morris (2014) argues that more attention needs to be paid the oldest members of our learning communities. Research in this area should explore older student needs related both to generation and age.

Final Thoughts

Increases in diversity based on ethnicity, gender identification, socioeconomic status, age and generation provide a strong foundation for rich adult learning experiences. Adult educators need to recognize the variety of perspectives adults bring with them to their learning and work in order to create positive opportunities.

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[i] Parts of this paper will appear in the *International Compendium of Adult and Continuing Education* (ICACE).