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Engaging Millennial Students in Leadership Education

Jill R. Arensdorf
and Anthony C. Andenoro

Introduction

As new generations of young people mature and enter higher education, educators must adapt their teaching methodologies through an examination of theory and research related to generational differences. This is necessary as well for faculty who teach in formal leadership degree programs. This article focuses on the current generation of undergraduate students, often referred to as the Millennial generation,¹ and asserts experiential education is particularly well suited to undergraduate leadership education programs given its focus on active learning. The article is divided into four sections, beginning with the presentation of a framework of best undergraduate education practices, which is followed by a section on the role of experiential learning for Millennials. The third and main section provides examples of how leadership education programs can successfully incorporate a range of experiential learning activities appropriate for undergraduate students. In the fourth section, the authors present their conclusions and recommendations.

Millennials and Best Undergraduate Education Practices

A generation is a “a cohort group whose length approximates the span of a phase of life and whose boundaries are fixed by peer personality” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 60). According to Wilson (2004), Millennial generation students are family-oriented and concerned with community—yet spend 20% of their time alone. Unlike previous generations, they live in a no-boundaries world and view technology as a way of life. Wilson (2004) also noted that these students are the most diverse generation in the history of the United States, aim for graduate school, and comprise the largest generation, with more than 80 million people.

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For these students, many argue that instruction often needs to be more varied. Wilson (2004) used the following principles, derived from Chickering and Gamson (1987), to frame her research on teaching Millennials:

1. Student-faculty contact
2. Reciprocity and cooperation
3. Active learning
4. Feedback
5. Time on task
6. High expectations
7. Diverse talents and ways of knowing

According to Kuh (2003), “Substantive contact between students and faculty is what matters” (p. 29). These interactions benefit Millennials because they provide a tangible connection to the material. With regard to reciprocity and cooperation, Howe and Strauss (2000) asserted that because Millennial students have grown up working in groups and playing on teams, it may be difficult for them to learn outside of groups and teams. Kuh (2003) suggested incorporating peer evaluation, grading of individual contributions to group projects, and observing group activities into courses.

Active learning is the third principle. Discussion rather than lecture may be more successful with Millennial learners. In general, McKeachie (2002) asserted that “discussion methods are superior to lectures in student retention of information after the end of a course, transfer of knowledge to new situations, development of problem-solving, thinking, attitude change, and motivation for further learning” (p. 52-53). Due to the no-boundaries world in which Millennials live as a result of the Internet, students expect to have access to information with ease and speed. Thus, frequent, prompt, and constructive feedback is crucial to engagement (Braxton, Eimers, & Bayer, 1996).

Time on task promotes highly involved schedules. Millennials have been rushed from obligation to obligation throughout their childhood with very little free time. This hectic lifestyle may continue as students attempt to manage class, social obligations, organizational involvement, and work in college. College is referred to as a potentially transforming experience and a once in a lifetime opportunity to challenge students to examine previous ways of knowing and thinking. For this transformation to take place to a meaningful degree, students must devote the time and effort to develop desired characteristics (Kuh, 2003).

High expectations are also an important part of the educational package for Millennials. When faculty and institutions expect students to perform well, students rise to the challenge and are more likely to exert more effort to meet those expectations. Conversely, low expectations are normally met with low effort and performance (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). A balance of challenge and support can be offered to manage comprehensive, yet realistic expectations for students (Kuh, 2003).

Finally, diverse talents and ways of knowing are accentuated with Millennials as they and their learning styles are the most diverse of any generations. Because students have differences related to their learning styles and abilities, instructional methods should vary to maximize the number of students positively impacted by the curricula. Faculty who employ a variety of strategies for student engagement are more likely to impact learning and enhance educational outcomes for students (King, 2003).

Experiential Learning and Millennials

In *Faust*, von Goethe (1808) noted that knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do. These statements capture the relationship between the development of intellect and emotional understanding with application. Experiential learning provides a vehicle to aid in establishing this developmental connection in Millennials who value active learning. By using students' own experiences, experiential learning provides them with the opportunity to generate action theory or decide what actions are needed to achieve a desired result in an effort to modify behavior to improve effectiveness (Johnson & Johnson, 1997).

Experiential learning is rooted in the concept of "hands-on learning" as described by Dewey (1938). More recently, Bronowski (1973) asserted that true understanding only results from doing (1973). Dewey's and Bronowski's work shares a strong link between the cognitive and behavioral domains of the human psyche. For example, Dewey (1938) wrote that true learning does not occur unless reflection is present while Bronski (1973) maintained that observation is the hand that drives the sub-sequential development of conceptual understanding. This relationship is also found in the work of Vygotsky (1962) where he stated that learning from experience is the process whereby human development occurs.

Two strategies are often used in experiential learning. The first, role-playing, brings individual skills and their consequences into focus. Here, students are asked to maintain who they are and react to the situation based upon the certain assumptions that the individual is asked to adopt. This activity often leads to an emotional experience which in turn leads to a cognitive response that affects the behavior and affect of the participating student. The educator's role within this activity is to coordinate the dissemination of roles and situational variables, periodically refocus the attention and direction of the activity, and provide an opportunity for reflection (Johnson & Johnson, 1997). The second strategy examines the idea of process observation. The foundation of this strategy lies in observation procedures, which allow members to describe and record the behavior of the group as it occurs. This strategy clarifies and improves the way groups function through objective assessment of the interaction among group members (Johnson & Johnson, 1997). The information about the activity is collected and then openly discussed with the learners to address modifications of group behavior that could add to group effectiveness. Critics of this strategy note the difficulty of maintaining non-biased observer perspectives. However, this further validates the intentional role of educators in experiential learning as they are asked to manage the competing dynamics and personalities in the situation. Within this strategy, addressing situational dynamics and personalities can add to the learning process as it will allow for more holistic perspectives to emerge for the learners.

Leadership Education and Millennials

Riggio, Ciulla, and Sorenson (2003) illustrated that leadership studies students should be guided by theories and research on leadership, and that these programs should cultivate the values of the field. Sound leadership education uses theories and concepts (classroom learning) and combines them with opportunities for students to put those theories into practice. In order for students to learn leadership, they must "do it," and experiential learning activities are paramount in assisting students with this process. These experiential opportunities give students the opportunity to work in teams and groups,

cooperate with faculty members, and enhance their learning through activity. The three pedagogical strategies discussed below—cognitive competencies, service learning, immersion activities—can enhance Millennials' learning.

Cognitive Competencies: Developing a Philosophy of Leadership

Winston Churchill said that "the empires of the future are the empires of the mind" (1943). This view is analogous to that of leadership education in that it aims to develop several cognitive competencies to enable students to be successful in their chosen field. Among these competencies are critical thinking, creativity, and contextual relativism. In an effort to promote these competencies, educators must be intentional. Intentionality rejects rigid pedagogical structures that measure learning objectives through formal exams and standardized writing assignments. Faculty provide students with new opportunities to challenge conventional assessment techniques and develop a strong foundation for organizational success through the development of these competencies.

An example is the leadership philosophy assignment that students are asked to complete within the Organizational Leadership program at Gonzaga University. In the course, "An Introduction to Organizational Leadership," students are asked to prepare a summary of their leading philosophy using class ideas, materials, and theories. Their leadership philosophy should reflect how philosophy as a discipline affects their leadership, and how it enhances their effectiveness and the effectiveness of their followers. Further, they are asked to include references to class discussions, outside texts, or articles that add credibility to their leadership philosophy. The assignment also includes perspectives and experiences that provide a foundation for their philosophy.

This assignment addresses the three cognitive competencies and encourages their development. Over the past two decades, academics have increased their attention to the dispositions of skills like critical thinking as a means for developing students' capacity for skills (Siegel, 1988; Paul, 1990; Facione & Facione, 1992; Esterle & Clurman, 1993; Ennis, 1996; Tishman & Andrade, 1996). Succinctly, this means that if students are predisposed to using a particular skill, they will develop the ability to use that skill more effectively in future situations. In addition, students become predisposed to self-regulation (Giancarlo & Facione, 2001) as they review the experiences of their life and the course materials to develop a leadership philosophy and convey it to the instructor.

This assignment also allows students to explore their ability to be creative. Creativity can be defined as something that is both novel and appropriate (Sternberg, 1999). To begin, students are told to show their genius and produce a quality product worthy of their education. This statement implies that they all have creative genius and maximizes their comfort with the alternative assignment. Further, they are told that they have the autonomy and freedom to convey their philosophy by any means necessary. For example, students have engaged instructors in a wide variety of activities to explain their philosophy of leadership. Together they have stood on train tracks, had pedicures, gone bowling, rode horses across campus, participated in high impact aerobics, played sports, shot guns, and artificially inseminated cows.

Yet, students must develop their philosophy within a minimalistic structure specified in the assignment's instructions. This structure allows for the development of innovations that leap beyond

conventional wisdom but are appropriate due to the minimalistic confines of the assignment. The minimalistic structure and appropriateness also allows students to explore the idea of contextual relativism. Leaders must assess contextual factors associated in the decision-making process in order to be effective. Contextual factors include sociological, cultural, political, and ideological aspects that prevent leaders from standardizing action plans and responses. This assignment challenges students within a safe environment to think creatively, but, at the same time, to take into consideration environmental details in development of their leadership philosophy.

The Indelible Impact of Service-Learning on Personal Leadership Growth

The purpose of service-learning in higher education is to provide students with a sense of civic and social responsibility and promote personal leadership growth (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). If these goals are met through their experiences, students can have a meaningful educational experience by learning about themselves and the world around them. They are then more prepared to face real issues outside their academic experience. For this effort to be successful in the long run, service-learning and civic engagement must be a component of the leadership education program and institution missions. This in turn will drive support for acceptance and implementation of service-learning and civic engagement activities on campus (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000).

Service learning is another type of active learning that ties into Dewey's concept of the efficacy of hands-on experiences. His idea of an educative experience is clearly apparent in service-learning programs where worthwhile activities that generate interest and curiosity over a considerable time span tend to foster student development. Ultimately, this is the goal of service-learning whereby students develop personally through their educational experiences.

Service-learning is a pedagogy that involves active learning which forges a clear link between course objectives and service activities. Although many definitions of service-learning are offered in research articles and scholarly work, a common theme among them is the concept of tying academic learning and service activities together to create a true learning experience for students. The hyphen is intentionally used in service-learning, due to the importance of the relationship between them. Without this connection, service "provides the fish, rather than the knowledge of how to fish effectively" for students. This balance is validated by Jacoby & Associates (1996) and Eyler & Giles (1999) who maintain that a delicate balance of challenge grounded in reflection for the participants in service-learning activities is essential. Bringle and Hatcher (1995) define service-learning as "a credit-bearing, educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (p. 112). Service-learning, as defined by Cress (2005) engages students in service activities "with intentional academic and learning goals and opportunities for reflection that connect to their academic disciplines" (p. 7). Fort Hays State University defines service-learning as "a method of teaching and learning that integrates community service activities into academic curricula and expands the learning of students from the classroom to the community" (2008).

Service-learning is offered by both programs that carefully integrate the service experience into the established curriculum and individual instructors who include a service-learning component in a course. During and upon completion of the service-learning activity, students engage in critical reflection. When students are engaged in highly reflective classes that integrate service with learning, students better understand issues and can apply this knowledge to their community (Gray et al., 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Roberts, 2008).

Students who participate in a service-learning course have increased their level of civic involvement (Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, & Geschwind, 2000). These findings reinforce research showing that service-learning is a powerful predictor of active citizenship (Niemi & Associates, 1974) and the ability to face obstacles and act effectively (Bandura, 1997). Students become competent individuals and have significantly higher opportunities to take on civic and leadership responsibilities (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000; Stafford, 2001). In addition to developing the ability to connect to experiences, students participating in service-learning strengthen their ability to serve the community and learn about social action. The importance of civic responsibility and dedication to leadership in the community is illuminated during the reflective process of service-learning. Students have the opportunity to grow and develop as leaders and citizens that academic programs seek to produce (Spence, 2000). Hence service-learning in a leadership course is critical to Millennial students development into future leaders.

Faculty members who are considering the implementation of a service-learning component into their course to foster civic-mindedness should consider the four essential components of service-learning: Preparation; action; reflection; and assessment (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Herrernan, 2001; Campus Compact, 2003; Fort Hays State University Service-Learning Committee, 2008). These components set service-learning apart from volunteerism and community service. Preparation includes developing learning outcomes for students and planning a project that will help foster that learning. Students should be involved in the planning stage of service-learning, as well as discussion of the service-learning concept. A description of service-learning as a pedagogy is a helpful addition to the course syllabus.

The action component of service-learning consists of the actual service experience. Students tackle a "real life" issue with its obstacles and successes. They have the opportunity to apply their academic learning to a project from which a community and/or community agency will benefit. Reflection follows action. Reflection, the ability to step back and think about the experience, is the most critical piece of the service-learning experience. For most students, this component enables them to realize the impact of their service and understand what they have truly learned through the semester or course project (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Collier & Williams, 2005). As a result of the study they conducted between 1993 and 1998, Eyler and Giles (1999) stated that, "quality and quantity of reflection was most consistently associated with academic learning outcomes: deeper understanding and better application of subject matter and increased knowledge of social agencies, increased complexity of problem and solution analysis, and greater use of subject matter knowledge in analyzing a problem" (p. 173).

As a final step, assessment and evaluation should occur in order to assess the extent to which the desired learning objectives have been reached. Community partners should also have the opportunity to

assess their experience. Eyler and Giles (1999, p. 189) list the following as questions to assess the service-learning experience:

- Do students have opportunities to do important work and take important responsibilities in community service placements?
- Are there close connections between academic subject matter and what students are doing in the community?
- Is reflection about the service integrated into classes through frequent opportunities for discussion and written analysis or projects?
- Does reflection challenge students to go beyond description and sharing of feelings to analysis and action planning?
- Do students work with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures?
- Are community projects developed in partnership with the community?

An example of this indelible impact can be seen in a course at Fort Hays State University, *Fieldwork in Leadership Studies*. During this course, teams of students spend the semester working on a service-learning project in collaboration with a community agency. Students and faculty spend the first day of the course talking about service-learning and its components. Community members from local organizations present their project ideas to the students. Students then choose their project and teams. Examples of projects include Big Brothers/Big Sisters recruitment; downtown revitalization activities; fundraising for Habitat for Humanity; and research and feasibility studies for new organizations in the community. During this preparation phase and throughout the project, community partners are valued as active participants in this educational experience. Community agency representatives serve as the main contact for the students. They also have the opportunity to attend two presentations given by students during the semester. The instructor of the course also maintains close contact with the agency to ensure that students and the agency are having a positive experience.

Students create teams and write a detailed strategic plan that illustrates how they plan to implement their community change. The instructor evaluates the plans and gives feedback to students. They then have the entire semester to implement their plan in collaboration with the community agency and its representatives.

Since reflection should be continuous throughout the service experience, students actively engage in reflection throughout their project orally in class with their instructor and fellow classmates. Community agency members also participate in reflection activities with students and the course instructor throughout the semester. Students are asked to submit written reflection papers mid-semester and after the project is completed. Questions that students might answer in their final reflection paper are as follows:

- What community need did your (or your team's) service help meet?
- What do you feel was your (or your team's) main contribution?
- Discuss at least two leadership theories, concepts, or skills you believe have been cemented more deeply in your mind as a result of this service experience.
- What did you learn about the importance of service to your community and personal life? (Department of Leadership Studies, 2008).

These reflection activities assist students in connecting leadership theories to their experiences.

Assessment of civic and academic learning is the final component of the course. Students' projects are assessed at the conclusion of the semester by the course instructor and community agency representatives with whom they worked. These qualitative data are assessed by the course instructor at the conclusion of the semester. Quantitative data are collected through a survey given to students at the conclusion of the course which measures social change behaviors and attitudes (Brungardt, 2005), and results are compared to data collected from students before completing the course. Students are also asked to complete a qualitative survey that asks questions regarding their best learning experiences throughout the program. Work is currently being done at Fort Hays State University to compose pre- and post-service assessments in order to evaluate the impact of service-learning and civic engagement activities across campus.

Immersion Activities: Another Type of Service-Learning

Immersion has been touted as a highly effective way for learners to develop perspectives that will allow them to be successful in dynamic situations (Johnson & Swain, 1997; Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2000). Based on an activity originally done at the University of Notre Dame Law School, students of Fort Hays State University were asked to embark upon an immersion, titled *Thought for Food*. This activity, conducted over a period of time leading up to the Thanksgiving holiday, addressed a community need and facilitated enhancement of undergraduates' ability to think critically, develop a moral foundation for practice, and create social awareness. Further it was aimed at extending an educational experience to promote social justice and create sustainable, civically engaged practices in students after graduation.

To facilitate this experience, a faculty member from the Department of Leadership Studies and another from the Department of Management and Marketing solicited support from the faculty within the College of Business and Leadership at Fort Hays State University. After gaining the support of the faculty, the program was advertised on campus to university students the week prior to the event. The exercise was conducted during multiple days of the week, allowing the original idea of challenging students to ask thoughtful questions to be employed in most classes.

The program was implemented in three ways:

1. *Thought for Food* – If students could provide thoughtful questions about the subject matter that was being presented in the course that week, the instructor would provide one can of food per question to be donated to the local food bank.
2. *Re-Thinking for Food* – If a student was displeased with a grade he or she received on a past assignment, that student could petition his or her instructor with cans of food to revise the assignment for additional points.
3. *Recognizing Charitable Deeds* – If students contributed food for the collection drive, they would be considered by their instructors for additional bonus points to supplement their overall grade in the course.

The impact of the program was felt in a variety of ways. The program raised 4,500 pounds of canned and dry goods for food banks and missions in Hays, Kansas. Further, it assisted in the development of core competencies validated by the literature and

created a framework for practice that promoted awareness and effective practice post graduation for both undergraduate management and leadership students. This activity extended education and promoted a social justice approach to undergraduate student learning. During an informal reflection period in class following the experience, one student noted, "Activities like this are really good because they point out that social justice is not patronizing, it is liberating." This statement exemplified the opportunities that exercises like this provide to student populations. They broaden student perspectives and create sustainable practice that promotes engaged citizenship. This is critical for the ever-changing dynamics of our society and the ability for students to be successful in future endeavors.

Conclusion

Leadership, regardless of definition, cannot be taught by a textbook alone, and if educators are to embrace the idea of highly engaged, holistic classrooms for Millennials, they must teach students to participate in real changes as both leaders and followers through practice and experiences. Educators cannot sit back and expect students to change in accordance with the standard generationally-driven teaching styles. The time has come for the purveyors of leadership education to embrace change and incorporate pedagogies that speak to Millennials. Shakespeare asked, "What is the city, but the people?" (1628, p. 638). This is applicable because it is the responsibility of educators to engage Millennial learners, the people within the city of undergraduate education. In the future, this idea will become critical as the Millennial generation will entirely recast the image of youth having profound consequences for society (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

What is the incentive to integrate these practices into courses? It is not for the tenure and promotion benefits. It is not for a raise in salary. It is not to win awards. It is not for educators' own self-interest. Experiential activities move students to see broader perspectives, learn through action, and apply that knowledge to a broader context than the four walls of the classroom. To educators, that should be a powerful incentive. Utilizing experiential activities to teach leadership to the Millennial generation undergraduate students is a pedagogical approach that leadership programs can and should use. It is not only about classrooms and meeting the needs of learners. This evolution in leadership programs can contribute toward meeting our society's goal of developing people who not only understand but also practice leadership in all walks of life. This intentional effort becomes the hinge from which the door of sustainability for higher education as an academy and the development of society at large swings back and forth.

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Endnote

¹ Millennial generation students are those born after 1982 (Coomes & DeBard, 2004).