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Who am I to teach these students?
What can I teach?
What do I know?

I am not a geologist, botanist, atmospheric scientist,
zoologist, microbiologist, or astronomer.
I can’t teach those things.
I could talk about calculus, and funky math,
economics, and the
Life-Cycle Environmental Impacts of Manufacturing Proton Exchange Membrane Fuel Cells,
but none of that seems terribly relevant here,
on the pacific coast of Baja California.

Here
Where Boojum trees aren’t just in poems;
Where lizards dance on hot sand;
Where lava clinks like heavy glass and looks like frozen froth;
Where snails drill holes in captive shells;
Where sand is black and white and pink;
Where squids are purple water jets that come ashore to die;
Where elephant trees live improbable lives and
Agave do bloom in the afternoon.

I discover these things with my students,
but what do I teach them? Do I teach by asking questions,
if I truly mean: What? How? Why?
Do I teach by offering my attention?
My wonder? My curiosity? My passion?

Is this enough?

Does this make me a teacher?
Use of Student Feedback on Reflection Papers to Assess Critical Thinking

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Abstract

Religious Studies presents a special challenge to the teaching of critical thinking. Reflection papers that asked students in World Religion classes to summarize, analyze, interpret, evaluate and apply to life the beliefs and practices of various religions, helped them to hone their critical thinking skills. Five separate classes of World Religions over a two-year period were asked to list the benefits and shortcomings of the reflection papers at the end of the semester. Besides affirming critical thinking as their highest choice, other students preferred outcomes such as better retention, preparedness for class, vibrant class discussions, improved writing ability and application to life.
Students from six World Religion classes over a two year period from a State University College were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of reflection papers to promote higher order levels of thinking. They were asked to summarize in reflection papers ten weekly readings over the semester and to critically analyze, evaluate and apply to their lives the content of the material. At the end of the semester, students submitted an evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of the use of reflection papers to their progress in critical thinking. They found many other advantages in their assessment of the reflection papers that went beyond the assignment to promote critical thinking.

Although critical thinking has been a goal of Educators in the past, its necessity has been strengthened by our contact with so many world cultures. Students must analyze, interpret and evaluate world events that are communicated daily by our mass media. They must make intelligent decisions regarding the occurring events and ideas in a pluralistic and global society. Courses in World Religions challenge our students to apply the techniques of critical thinking to the various beliefs and practices of Eastern and Western religions that appear with such prominence in the media.

Alexander Astin (1993) in his popular book "Assessment for Excellence", says, “Of all the skills that are considered basic to the purpose of liberal education, critical thinking is probably at the top of the list”. Perry (1999) stressed the need for reflective thinking focused on the evaluation of various alternatives as essential to critical thinking. A longitudinal study by Giancarlo & Falcione (2001) tested the critical thinking dispositions of freshmen and then again four years later as seniors. Students showed a growth in critical thinking skills in that “they came to endorse more strongly the ideal of putting aside personal biases in the pursuit of good evidence and reason” (2001). The authors also found that humanities, letters and language students scored highest in truth seeking and open-mindedness.

**Challenges to Critical Thinking in Religion Classes**

Although World Religions is a Humanities course, students in some of our classes appear to be challenged to stay open-minded when discussing values, laws and beliefs which seem to be in conflict with their own. Religion by its nature promotes certitude in its adherents and thus becomes a challenge to critical thinkers. A study of world religions provides so many alternate beliefs, practices and values that some students feel threatened. The students find the issue of truth seeking challenging because they have definite ideas of truth formed by their own religious and cultural traditions. As important as reflection
on multiple interpretations of subject matter is to critical thinking, many students find it difficult to be open-minded when their cherished values are at stake. There is a fear when examining many diverse scriptures and beliefs of various religions that the investigation may lead to relativism. The thought arises that with so many scriptures from so many religions, none of them may be true. Or perhaps all of them have truth. If one religion is as good as another, what is the purpose of adhering to one’s own religious tradition? Or it might work in reverse, in that some students believe that only their religion contains the truth, so all others must be in error.

Critical thinking is so important for students of World Religions classes because they not only have to reflect on their own opinions and assumptions, but also they need to consider alternate positions. Some of the Eastern Religions that we study focus on a monistic approach to life rather than the dualistic system with which they are so accustomed. Some students have difficulty adjusting from the categorical thinking of the West to the more integrative thinking of the East. Reflective thinking helps students to avoid the pitfalls pointed out by Paul, Elder and Bartell (2004) “Human thinking left to itself often gravitates toward prejudice, over generalization, common fallacies, self deception, rigidity and narrowness”.

Definitions of Critical Thinking

Robert Ennis (1987) defines critical thinking as “Reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe. Gerald Nosich (2005) adds the actions of “questioning, seeking answers to our questions through reason and research and believing the results enough to act on them”. In deciding our actions, one must decide what to value and how to weigh competing values and how best we can achieve our goals. In order to avoid the pitfall of making too hasty conclusions, Bailin et al. (1999) characterizes critical thinking as “responsible assessment of reasons and arguments, along with responsible deliberation”. Pithers and Soden (2000) refer to the need for disciplined thinking that is practiced by accepting and rejecting arguments based on purposeful and reasoned judgment, not based on emotions or assumptions.

A key ingredient of critical thinking is knowledge, which is necessary to make informed decisions. Each of the World Religions must be evaluated on its own merits as a philosophical system, not on the ways they fail to adhere to Western criteria. Rather, each religion needs to be evaluated on the
correlation between their beliefs, rituals, and practices, which include their moral standards. For instance, when Hinduism worships a plurality of gods and goddesses, they are not inconsistent with their belief in one Ultimate Reality. The various deities are just manifestations of the One Ultimate Reality, Brahman. Students need the knowledge of the doctrines and scriptures of each religion before they can attempt to evaluate them.

Critical thinking in world religion classes depends upon the students’ ability to entertain ideas without necessarily accepting them. Some students have become so enamored of Buddhism that they have contemplated conversion to that religion. Others just admire the admirable essence of the teachings without trying to make them their own. Some in their zeal to refrain from judging negatively on a certain religion will accept such practices as bride burning, female infanticide and suttee of widows as part of the cultural norms. A discussion on objective moral values, such as the dignity of the human person and the priority of human life helps students to critically analyze the reasons given for some of the questionable practices. Applying the principles of critical thinking is essential to the application of religious, cultural and political issues so those students can see the multifaceted dimensions of the questions as they reflect on their own participation in a pluralistic world.

Methodology

I assigned Reflection papers that were due each week over the semester that asked students to summarize, critically analyze, evaluate and apply to life the assigned readings. At the end of the semester, students were asked to list the pros and cons of the assignment for a five point extra credit. There were no other directions. They generated the advantages and disadvantages themselves without any outside help. They attached their names to the evaluation which attracted almost full class participation.

Shakirova (2007) says there are four stages in developing critical thinking, all of which involve motivation and reflection. Students must (1) see the relevance of the knowledge, awakening an interest and curiosity toward the subject, (2) engage in critical reading and writing, (3) engage in contemplation or reflection, shaping a personal opinion and attitude toward the material, (4) generalizing and assessing the information and application to life’s problems. With these criteria in mind, I gave the following directions for the reflection papers.
Because the academic study of religion demands that we examine each religion from the viewpoint of the insider, we cannot judge or compare religious beliefs from a sectarian viewpoint in class. However students should have the opportunity to analyze, evaluate and critically reflect on the various aspects of each religion.

Therefore ten reflection papers are assigned at 5 points each so that students may engage in higher order thinking as they prepare for class. The papers should contain a summary of the chapter and your reflection on the material as you critically analyze, interpret, evaluate and apply it to life.

The papers are to consist of no less than one full page or no more than two pages of double spaced 12 point typing. Half of the paper will contain your summary of the subject matter and the other half your critical analysis and application to life. My evaluation of your papers will be confined to your ability to summarize the material and the connections you make to your reflection. It will not include your opinions. Papers will be collected each Monday and returned each Wednesday with my comments.

Students were asked at the end of the semester to list the benefits and shortcomings of these ten reflection papers assigned over the semester. Five classes of World Religions were involved in the study over a two-year period, four regular semester classes and one summer session class. Most of the students were seniors and juniors.

The total number of returns was 172, with 565 responses because there was no limit to their comments. The affirmative responses numbered 480 and the negative responses were 85. Because the responses were freely given with no restrictions to the number of benefits or shortcomings, many answers were repetitious. I tried to consolidate the divergent responses into the following categories. They are recorded according to the number of answers beginning with the highest.

**Affirmative Responses**

1. Promoted critical thinking 65
2. Can give my personal opinion 60
3. Helped me to study for tests 54
4. Helped me to understand the topics more in depth 54
5. Kept students up to date and prepared for class 52
6. Liked the ability to apply the readings to life 41
7. Added to class discussions because everyone was prepared 32
8. Growth in writing ability, summarizing and note taking 30
9. Made me read the chapters 26
10. Helped me to learn, retain and process information 19
11. Allowed me to compare the religions to my personal faith 18
12. Learned more about myself 18

Negative Responses

1. Too difficult to summarize a whole chapter in one page 44
2. Too difficult and time consuming to have a paper every week 41

Interpretations

1. Promoting critical thinking

Students did place this factor highest on the hierarchical plan, indicating that they thought they attained some competence. Because some students hold their religious beliefs and practices strongly, they are not eager to question them. The elements of critical thinking involving analyzing arguments and searching alternatives seem heretical to them. Students of the fundamentalist persuasions are very resistant to questioning their own beliefs, but can be somewhat judgmental in their observation of others. But their answers to the survey questions indicated that they were able to overcome some of their prejudices over time.

On the other hand, many students are so fearful of judging others, that they refrain from making any negative comments even in the face of objectively evil practices. Various religions justify in their teaching such issues as wars, oppression of women, infanticide and lack of human rights. It is sometimes difficult for our students to understand that some actions are objectively wrong regardless of religious beliefs and practices. Some students struggle toward the tendency to generalize to a whole religion such incidental practices as suicide bombing and assassinations, resulting in narrow understandings and stereotypical thinking. Even with all these challenges to critical thinking, most students saw the value to its use.

2. Can give my personal opinions

The academic study of religion demands that the instructor and student remain neutral regarding personal opinions and refrain from comparing one particular religion with another. Students seemed to enjoy recording their own opinions without fear of grade penalty. I thought it was important to see the
arguments they constructed to justify their opinions. After a few comments on their papers commending their efforts, supporting arguments improved. Some students, still hesitant to express judgment on other religious beliefs and practices needed to be prodded to place their negative opinions more on the practices rather than on their beliefs. This helped them to evaluate the religion more on its consistency between the dimensions of beliefs, rituals and practice rather than emotional reactions.

3. **Helped me to study for tests.**

A priority for success in college is achievement on tests. Students are realistic in determining the benefits of their time and energy toward that goal. Our students are pragmatists and passing exams takes precedence over many other activities. Testing usually causes anxiety in students and they seek out any aids to insure their success. Students in study groups said that their summaries were helpful because they stressed the important points. Their test results compared favorably to previous classes that had not written reflection papers.

4. **Helped to understand the topics more in depth**

The assignment was designed to promote higher orders of thinking so I was pleased that so many students said that they understood the topics more in depth. With so many religions to study in a short time, it is essential that students have more than a cursory overview of each one. We hung each religion on the framework of its three most salient dimensions: the intellectual dimension includes the scriptures and doctrines, the experiential involves rituals, prayers, and meditations, the organizational describes the leadership, offices, and creativity expressed in art, artifacts, music and architecture. Students often made these connections in their reflection papers, especially if they could see the relation to their majors.

5. **Kept students up to date and prepared for class.**

The results of the NESSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) study indicated that students often missed their reading assignments and came unprepared for class. When students are familiar with the vocabulary of the discipline, especially the scriptures, rituals, leadership roles etc., the lectures and class discussions are more meaningful. Repetition has the benefit of aiding retention of the material, which helps students in the testing process. Writing summaries forced students to read thoughtfully, looking for the important points. Part of the goals of higher order thinking is to challenge students to put
ideas into their own words rather than regurgitating the material. It took some time over the semester to help students refrain from copying words from the text. Because attendance was taken from the papers received, students were conscientious about handing in the readings.

6. **Liked the application to life**

Students said they were motivated to read because the material was relevant when they could apply it to their lives. Each religion has its own version of spirituality, which is connected to their everyday living. The problem of suffering and suggestions for coping with it according to Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity showed many similarities among them, which stimulated student interest. The moral code of Shinto and the concern for ecology of the Native Americans was most appealing to our students. Opposed at first, our students began to look more kindly at the arranged marriages of Hinduism. Confucianism’s concern for order in society, although paternalistic, seemed quite relevant to our present culture of individualism. It was the persistence in prayer, five times a day in Islam that aroused the most admiration in our students. Because the issue of suffering is tied so closely to the problem of evil, it prompted some deep inquiry and reflection on the part of the students.

7. **Added to class discussion because everyone was prepared.**

Unfortunately, it did not refer to everyone, but the quality of the discussions did improve over previous classes before I assigned the reflection papers. Their ability to summarize on the papers did improve, leading to a shortening of the meandering comments during the small group discussions. The reflections from their own opinions and experiences seemed to interest their listeners and encourage similar responses. Small group discussions helped the instructor to accommodate to students’ diverse learning styles. Grasha (1996) has defined learning styles as “personal qualities that influence a student’s ability to acquire information, to interact with peers and the teacher, and otherwise participate in the learning experience”. The exchange of information and personal experiences helped to build a sense of community, which showed in the conversation before and after class. The downside of this community building was that it was difficult to break up the groups for discussion with other students because they became so comfortable with their companions in their own groups. The large class discussions benefited from their preparation because it involved more students instead of a usual few.
8. **Growth in writing ability, note taking and summarizing**

I noticed a distinct improvement over the semester in the student’s ability to summarize. My own comments on their papers changed from “use your own words”, “do not copy the book”, to “succinct expression”, “captured the essence” etc. Even their short essay exams over the semester exhibited a honed writing ability that kept to the point rather than supplying extraneous information in the hope that one might hit the correct answer.

9. **Made me read the chapters.**

Although this is not very commendable motivation, the grade assigned to the papers gave an impetus to handing them in on time. A point was deducted each day a paper was late because the class lecture and discussion were geared to the prepared reading. A few students said that the reflection papers made them buy the book, something they rarely did.

10. **Helped me to learn, retain and process information**

The retention showed in their higher marks in their exams, however, the processing was more difficult to evaluate. When they were asked on the department class evaluation form at the end of the semester “what they liked best about the class”, almost every person answered, “learning about different religions”.

11. **Allowed me to compare the religions with my personal faith**

Since we tried not to compare religions, but only generalize salient features that all religions contain, students needed an opportunity to reflect on the similarities and differences between their own religion and the religions studied. Some of the students who did not know much about their own religions were forced to do some research. Others did reflect on the merits of some of their own religious practices, especially the attitudes displayed towards women.

12. **I learned more about myself**

Critical thinking engenders self reflection. The study of spirituality examines motives for behavior, many of them hidden at first from the owner. Practicing the meditations led to self-knowledge, a criterion for critical thinking. Walker & Finney (1999) found that one of the benefits of reflection is self-awareness. “This in turn seems to have led to the development of a more thoughtful, inquiring and open –minded approach in both, their professional and personal life”. Instructors of Religion courses never tell students
what to believe, only that they know why they believe. This self-knowledge leads to maturity, preparing our students for more satisfying and abundant lives.

Conclusions

A quote from one of the students helped to evaluate the assignment for me. “Most courses do not put a major emphasis on higher order thinking, but I believe that this higher order thinking which includes critical thinking is key to any education”.

Some colleges have undertaken special Critical Thinking classes while others have chosen to incorporate the essentials of critical thinking into regular classes. I found that students were receptive to using the principles of critical thinking in their work when they were presented as characteristics of higher order thinking.

Students overcame their fear of questioning religious beliefs and showed willingness to question assumptions, a foundational rubric for critical thinking. They learned the difference between uncritical and predisposed judgment and objective evaluation based on evidence. Critical thinking encourages the study of scripture, values and beliefs of various religions to promote active engagement in a pluralistic world. Our global society demands the ability to understand and value perspectives other than one’s own. The study of various religions offered opportunity to present unfamiliar concepts and perspectives that challenged students to use the skills of critical thinking. Religions by their nature encourage certitude, but the academic study of religion is more conducive to critical thinking than theology that structures arguments in defense of the specified religion. Our World Religions course uses analytical thinking which requires freedom of inquiry to examine controversial beliefs and practices. The reflection papers provided the opportunity for this examination and questioning in a private, conflict free environment.

The reflection papers stimulated class discussion, which allowed students to share their insights. The variety of student learning styles was reflected in the class discussions. Students who learn better through discussion rather than lecture, were prepared to contribute and assimilate the concepts of others. Full class discussions enabled the teacher and students together, to explore important issues that deepen understanding and respect for the viewpoints of the various religions.

Critical thinking skills contributed to the improvement of students’ writing ability. One cannot write well without thinking coherently. Argument building, answering opposition viewpoints, and coming to
reasoned conclusions are elements of critical thinking that contribute to good writing. Future employers look for writing abilities that incorporate analytical thinking, effective communication, and collaborative problem solving skills. College professors can prepare students for these expectations through the use of reflection papers that promote critical thinking.

The study of World Religions encourages students to look beyond the classroom to the world’s major questions that demand analytical, ethical and reasoned answers. Cooperative as well as individual performance will enhance the creative efforts engendered by critical thinking as our students move into a world challenged by a shortage of religious principles of justice, forgiveness, compassion and human dignity.

**Teacher evaluation**

Faculty often desire a richer feedback over the standard end of course evaluations required by college and academic departments. I would use the reflection papers again to gain the student feedback as one method of evaluation along with testing and class participation. Naidu and Jarvela (2006) suggest that student transcript analysis is an effective method to assess student learning. I was surprised at the various responses that claimed to help testing, understanding of the subject matter, improved writing ability, especially the improvement in summarizing; making them read the chapters and the chance to give their own opinions. I must admit that these were some of my hidden agendas, but I did not think that the students would recognize them so easily.

Assigning the reflection papers ten times over the semester helped me to adapt my teaching to the needs of the students in a timely fashion. For example, I found that I had to spend more time on the elements of critical thinking and the recognition of arguments.

Waiting until the end of the semester for course evaluation prevents the professor from adapting her teaching techniques to the advantage of student learning. Seldin (1993) gave sound advice, "If course evaluations are to be used to improve teaching, they should be given within the semester so that the instructors have a chance to improve their teaching".

In the future, I would like to compare grades of students who did not use the reflection papers with grades of students who did use them. Looking back to past classes, I did notice that the marks were better in these classes that used the reflection papers. I would like to use reflection papers in other
classes to see if the students would claim similar progress to the World Religion Classes. It seems that many subjects could benefit from the use of reflection papers, especially humanities courses. Students would be encouraged to use higher forms of thinking, hallmarked by critical thinking in literature, history, philosophy and theater courses. Because the papers gave me insight into the private lives of the students, my relationship with many of them improved. I could talk to them about their personal goals, fears, and hardships during office hours in a more relaxed manner.

It seems to me that obtaining direct information from students is more beneficial to the professor than reading about them from another author. Therefore I think that most classes from various disciplines would benefit from weekly reflection papers to enable students to grow beyond their own ethnocentric thinking as they consider solutions to our global world problems.
References


The Value of a Cooperative Service Project as Reciprocal Teaching/Learning for Undergraduate and Graduate Students

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a qualitative study undertaken to discover what two groups of students learned from participating together in a volunteer service-learning project. Students reported satisfaction with their labors, an enjoyment of team work, an appreciation for family and material goods, the value and impact they had on others and the community, and an awareness of personal skills and competencies. Implications for teaching/ student learning and recommendations for future research and practice are also presented.
Current scholarship validates the integration of volunteer and service-learning projects into college course work as a means to promote learning (Astin & Sax, 1998; Brody & Wright, 2004; Eyler & Giles, 1999). The opportunity to participate in service-learning enhances important content knowledge in a variety of disciplines including social work (Timmermans & Bouman, 2004), education (Guaderrama, 2000), and political science (Berson & Younkin, 1998) among others. In addition, service-learning for college students has been linked to further development in critical thinking (Ehrlich, 2000), diversity awareness (Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2000), values commitment (Rhoads, 1997) and indirectly to stronger graduation and retention rates (Eyler & Giles, 1999). In this research project two classes of students, one undergraduate and one graduate, taught by the same instructor, were paired and participated in one of two service-learning projects held during the same week-end. The primary purpose of the project was two-fold: 1) To provide graduate student role models for first year students who were new to campus, and 2) To provide an applied setting for graduate students to learn about first year students. Teaching and learning were to be reciprocal outcomes within the same project. The purpose of this research then, was to assess the extent to which learning about other students took place while also assessing the benefits to students of using a volunteer service-learning project as a teaching/learning methodology. This study adds to the current SoTL literature by assessing graduate students' learning that is typically not studied (McKinney, 2007) and through the inclusion of student voices and student recommendations for changes to the project to enhance the overall learning experience.

Logistics of the Service-learning Project

Participants in this project included 18 first year undergraduate students enrolled in a first year experience (LinC) course and 15 graduate students enrolled in a course on the study of college students which were taught by the same instructor. One of the requirements of the LinC course was to participate in six hours of service within the local community. An intended outcome in the college student course was for students to learn about and better understand traditionally aged first year students. Given both of those course goals, the opportunity for the two classes of students to work together on a service project and learn with and from each other seemed intriguing. Weigert (1998) explains that when service “flows from and into course objectives” (p. 5) it provides a true learning experience.
Within our local community there is a week-end of service and activism called Sharefest. I was able to find appropriate service projects that would offer large groups of college-aged students opportunities to be involved and make a difference to the local community where they were attending college. The first project involved painting a group home for developmentally disabled adults, and the second project was to clear away brush and do yard work at a childcare center for children from low income families. The two projects were scheduled for one-half day on a Friday afternoon and a Saturday morning, and students could choose to work with either project based on personal interest or their schedule.

Students were assigned by the instructor to work in teams of four including two graduate students and two undergraduate students per team. The teams were purposefully arranged to promote discussion among students who had not already bonded with each other in the first three weeks of class, and to allow for teams with various differences in race, ethnicity, religion, major, and hometown. Graduate students were assigned the position of “informal leaders” and were briefed on their role to initiate conversation, provide direction for the work to be completed, facilitate icebreakers, and provide transportation for the group.

**Methodology for the Study**

Following the week-end service experience every student submitted a reflective paper detailing his or her own thoughts on what was learned from the service project using prompts provided by the instructor. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) report that service-learning activities are more productive when there are written or oral reflection elements incorporated into projects. Furthermore, “reflection activities direct the student’s attention to new interpretations of events and provide a means through which the community service can be studied, analyzed, and interpreted much like a text is read and studied for deeper understanding” (Bringle, Phillips & Hudson, 2004, p. 6). Students were asked to reflect on how they felt about completing the service-learning project and working with the other students, what they learned about themselves and others from the experience, and how likely that they would participate in volunteer service in the future. First year students also completed journal assignments each week and many discussed their experiences with their team and the service-learning project more in depth in the journal entry immediately following the service experience. After the papers and journals were submitted,
discussions were held separately in both classes to clarify ideas and obtain additional insights that can only result when a group of people with shared experiences come together and talk. In addition, qualitative remarks from the course evaluations were also reviewed for comments particular to the shared service-learning projects and were included as an additional source of data in this study.

Reflections from the papers and journals, course evaluations, and class discussions were analyzed by taking significant student quotes and thoughts and then grouping those using common or reoccurring themes (Merriam, 2002). Based on this basic interpretive data analysis seven distinct and broad categories of responses emerged. In order to validate the choice of these themes and establish a level of trustworthiness in the analysis, two colleagues who also taught these same classes reviewed the raw data and were asked to sort student comments into the established themes. In addition, students themselves were offered the opportunity to review the themes that emerged and to comment about how their experience did or did not fit with those themes. Students were asked for feedback only after the semester had ended and there was not a perceived pressure to respond in a certain way since the classes were completed and grades already assigned. Based on peer review and participant feedback, several changes to the themes and to the comments associated with those themes were made.

What follows is a discussion of the seven themes that emerged from the data collected and the student comments supporting those themes that are used to further explain students' learning. Following the discussion of each theme, implications and suggestions for teaching and learning using similar a pedagogy including a service-learning project will be presented.

**Results: In Their Own Words**

Students involved in the cooperative service-learning projects reported understanding the linkage between themselves and people in need, satisfaction with the project and the amount of work completed, enjoyment in helping others and working as a part of a team, greater appreciation for what material goods and personal supports they had, an awareness of the value and impact of their work, experiences with people they never would have otherwise, and a new awareness of their own personal skills and competencies. This section will share the ideas and thoughts of student learners who were engaged in service-learning projects as a part of class and what they believed they took away from this experience.
Theme one: Linkages to People in Need

Originally the class was asked to paint a group home, but we learned several days before the project that our help was needed to paint a home for two families who had been displaced by Hurricane Katrina and were moving to our community. This allowed for discussion in class about our connection in Illinois to persons in need on the Gulf coast. Our campus was also engaged in the American Democracy Project and wanted to promote civic engagement that Thomas Ehrlich (2000) defines as “working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference…promoting the quality of life in a community through both political and non-political processes” (p. vi). This service-learning project seemed very relevant to that effort, and this connection was discussed in the classroom with students as well. One student reflected in his paper, “Once it was announced in class that our service project would be painting a house for the victims of Hurricane Katrina, I felt that I was doing something that would have meaning behind it…”

The intentional link made within course discussion between participation in service within our community and the recent natural disaster on the Gulf coast provided an opportunity to process student feelings, examine connections between seemingly unrelated groups of citizens, and provided students additional motivation to become involved in disaster relief efforts. Following the class discussion, one student remarked, “I was very happy that I was going to be able to help someone from Hurricane Katrina because I was feeling like I had not done my part to help the victims.”

Teaching/learning strategies:

In order to further establish the relationship of students in the class to those being helped in the community and in the Southeast, an activity was done using the children’s book Zoom by Istvan Banyai (1995). Zoom is a picture book that begins with a seemingly abstract drawing on page one, which is found, on page two to be a rooster’s comb. In subsequent pages the drawing becomes broader and more global by zooming out to reveal more and more of a scene, ending, 30 pages later, with the view of the earth from far out in space. Each student was given one page from this book and told to describe the picture to others in the class, one at a time, without showing it to anyone. Students were instructed to find the connections between the pictures. After the activity was completed and students found the relationship among the pictures in the book, a discussion was held linking the situation between poverty
in our community and destruction on the Gulf coast to our class. We then discussed other more “real” connections between students in our classes and the issues we were addressing through the service-learning projects. For instance, one student had a cousin who lived in New Orleans, another had a neighbor in the National Guard who was being sent to help with the removal of hurricane debris, and another had a sister who was a single mother and relied on subsidized child care. All of these stories had great meaning for students in both classes and allowed them to better understand how their help locally could make a difference in the lives of many others.

Following this discussion, one graduate student commented that “I have noticed that many people in the Midwest (or in the U.S. for that matter) do not think there is anything else in the world other than their own community, friends, and family.” Using this learning activity allowed students to see that perhaps their view of the world was limited, but that through helping others they might also expand their own knowledge and understanding of people they had never met.

Theme two: Satisfaction with the project and the amount of work completed

As might have been anticipated, in spite of initial reluctance and some complaints from the undergraduate students in particular, most students in their reflective papers, journals, course evaluations, and class discussions reported satisfaction with the service-learning project and with the amount of work that was completed individually and as a group. One first year student stated, “The feeling I received after I looked back on the completed house gave me strong motivation to continue doing community service.” There was a sense of accomplishment that permeated both the reflective papers and the class discussions. There was also a sense of surprise at what college students were able to do in a short period of time and how they felt afterwards. One undergraduate student commented, “I felt such a feeling of accomplishment like I had done something worthwhile…It is good to give a monetary donation, but I felt more of a sense of really doing something and helping after the service project.”

Because both projects allowed the participants to see immediate results, the freshly painted house and the weed and branch-free playground, students could assess on site the value of their labors. “It was nice to be able to step back and look at exactly what we had done,” said one participant. The sense of accomplishment also was demonstrated by student recognition that the children and the families would be grateful for the assistance provided by both classes. After painting the house for the hurricane
evacuees, we took group photographs and the students wanted to send a note and their picture to the families who would be moving in. At the childcare center, one student related “It was awesome to know that Monday when the children arrived they would have clean blacktop on which to play basketball and a playground without weeds coming through the stones.”

It is also noteworthy that although students were initially apprehensive and even upset about having to “give up” their time in order to participate in this service-learning project, that they reported having a positive experience after it was completed.

**Teaching/learning strategies:**

Focusing on the end product and the intended outcomes of the service-learning project may be helpful in building student enthusiasm beforehand. Eyler & Giles (1999) offer five strategies for thoughtful reflection after completing service projects, and one of those strategies is making a connection. This end result that is anticipated may have a relationship to local, state-wide, or national events in order to best motivate students. Students in this study reported that painting a home for families displaced by the hurricane was much more rewarding than if they had painted the same home for developmentally disabled adults. If the instructor is able to connect the service-learning project to something that has affected the students, then the potential for learning may be greater.

Another way to enhance learning would be to connect the people being served with the students in some sort of interaction before or after the service-learning project is completed. Seeing or meeting the people who will benefit from the work might provide an important stimulus to allow students to be more enthusiastic beforehand about completing the project and better understand how their efforts will make a difference to real people.

**Theme three: Enjoyment in helping others and working as a part of a team**

A third concept that emerged from the data was the gratification that was expressed by students in their ability to help others while working as a part of a team. “After cleaning up the playgrounds I felt satisfied. I felt proud of myself and the students I worked with. We all worked really hard and the hard work was worth every drop of sweat.” This was especially notable because the students in the two classes had no knowledge of each other until the day of the service project. There was even initial apprehension by the undergraduate students who had some preconceived notions about what graduate
students would be like and how they would or would not relate to the first year students socially. Throughout the day students in both classes shared stories, snacks, and worked together. One new student reported “At the end of the day the school looked amazing, and I thought that all of us involved felt closer because of it.”

Another aspect of the value of team work became clearer through student journals and papers which discussed how much more could be accomplished as a member of a group than as an individual. “Everyone seemed to have put forth all their effort to make a difference for the children.” Several students planned further involvements through campus organizations that would allow them to work with others on service-learning projects which were an intended outcome of the LinC class in particular. “If anything, I feel this experience has really motivated me to work towards getting involved and looking into campus and community service organizations to which I could donate some of my time,” reported one undergraduate student.

The magnitude of the projects that were undertaken seemed so big, and almost unattainable when viewed initially. The home that was painted (walls and ceilings) contained five large bedrooms, two bathrooms, a great room, kitchen, entry and interior hallways. The childcare center had two large playground areas, a blacktopped basketball area, and several gardens and exterior landscaping that needed extensive maintenance. One student remark captured the essence of what others were also feeling when she noted that “working together to help others makes you feel helpful because some work is just unable to be done without someone else’s help.”

Teaching/learning implications:

This project brought two classes of otherwise unrelated students together to complete important work. Without this service-learning project, perhaps most of the students would have no opportunity to interact or to learn from each other. There was awkwardness between the two classes of students as we gathered on campus to leave for the service-learning projects. Each team of four rode to the project in the same car and was asked to choose a team name en route. This served as an ice-breaker, but also gave the teams a chance to learn more about each other. A suggestion that students made following the event was to bring the classes together prior to working on the service-learning project. This, said the students,
would have allowed them to begin the team building process earlier and perhaps they might have accomplished more.

Both classes also wished that there had been time to process the experience right after the service-learning projects had been completed, perhaps over pizza and sodas. The teams wanted more of an opportunity to talk about their experiences while the information and the feelings were fresh. While this would have been positive in terms of a debriefing to the activity, I wondered about the reflective or thoughtful element that may be missed by discussing what was learned in a group setting too soon. Perhaps individual voices or alternative perspectives to the learning would be lost or over-ridden in the discussion process immediately following the projects. This concern was validated by Strage (2000) who found that students were better able to integrate concepts associated with a service-learning project later in the semester than they were at mid-term (p.11).

By working as a part of a team and discussing with others the backgrounds and upbringing each person had prior to college, some students came to realize how fortunate they been growing up compared with others.

**Theme four: Greater appreciation for material goods and personal supports**

Since these projects and subsequent discussions were completed shortly after Hurricane Katrina devastated the United States Gulf Coast and the photographs from newscasts were showing widespread devastation, a third theme, greater appreciation for what material goods students had, may have been more situated in current events than in the actual service-learning activities performed. Nonetheless, this theme emerged strongly from students as they reflected on the new inhabitants of the house that was painted and the children who spent each day at the childcare center where we cleaned the grounds and playground. Several similar comments reflected that “by participating in this service project I learned how lucky my family, friends, and I were when we were growing up” and “I really do take things for granted, and I realized this when I was thinking of all the people that lost all of their belongings in the hurricane.”

Today’s traditionally aged college students as a whole have grown up in an era of relative economic productivity (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Students in both classes reported that their families had some level of disposable income. Working for people from a very different socio-economic stratum also was a learning experience for most of the students involved in the projects. “I realized how hard it must
be on those families, so painting the inside of their house was the least I could do.” A certain level of naiveté was also evident especially in the remarks of the first year students. One student wrote that, “seeing and hearing about people who don’t have things that I take for granted reminds me of what is truly important and I want to help others so they can have all the things I have.”

Teaching/learning implications:

While recognizing their own privilege, students also reported learning how much their efforts would assist the families who benefited from their labor which was something they had not considered prior to the service-learning project. It would have enhanced learning in both classes if we had addressed the issue of poverty from an intellectual perspective through readings and discussions before participating in the service-learning projects. Hatcher, Bringle, and Muthiah (2004) found that “…students benefited from repeated, rather than isolated, opportunities to connect community service to the course content” (p. 42). The graduate class studied college students from low socio-economic backgrounds after the service-learning project, and their discussion was greatly informed by their participation in the project combined with the assigned readings (Ehrenreich, 2001; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Suskind, 1998). In a course evaluation one student commented, “The reading materials were extremely helpful, particularly the books for the literature circle (on students from poor backgrounds).”

Even though the students recognized they had been very fortunate in their upbringings, they also were moved by their awareness of how much their work meant to other people who needed it.

Theme five: An awareness of the value and impact of their work

A number of students had never participated in service-learning projects before which was surprising given the emphasis in both high schools and undergraduate institutions on volunteerism and service-learning (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The fifth theme, an awareness of the value and impact their work meant to others, shows the lack of understanding of some students, even at the graduate level, about the importance of service to a community.

“I learned that I am capable of assisting other members of the community by simply painting a house. It did not seem like that big of a deal to me at first, but looking back I understand that those six hours of my time really helped people in need.” As surprising as it seems, particularly in light of what they reported about how much could be accomplished by working as a part of a team, students reported
amazement at the value of their efforts to others. They began to see themselves as part of and contributing to something bigger and outside of themselves. This learning was expressed by a student who indicated, “At first we thought of this as a job. After we got to the house and learned about the people moving in, I realized how much this was helping them.”

One student had significant experience working with volunteer organizations before coming to campus and she was especially interested in and engaged in the landscaping project at the childcare center because she had spent her summer working outdoors doing grounds maintenance. Given this experience, she served as a resource and educator for those doing gardening work by teaching others to prune bushes, remove underbrush, and create a safe and aesthetically pleasant playground area. Her insights were especially thoughtful as she commented “Being involved in service projects helps people I am helping realize they are cared about, helps me reach outside of my comfort zone, and helps me meet other people.”

A final comment from a male first year student summed up the “ah ha!” that was apparent throughout the conversations held within the classes and in the written assignments about the impact that students felt they made while being a part of these service-learning projects. “I was always the one saying, ‘If I am not going to be paid then what is the point in working?’ Now I realize the point is to make a difference in someone else’s life that is less fortunate than you.”

Teaching/learning implications:

One major benefit of incorporating service-learning projects as a learning tool in college courses has to do with the immediacy with which students understand what they learned and how they (and others) benefited from participation in the project. Many of these insights were collected from students within two weeks of their experience, which allowed them some time to process and reflect, but they were able to share very deep thoughts about their own learning and the value of the project rather quickly. Other comments about the service-learning project were provided at the end of the semester in course evaluations. Students had time to absorb class material and experiences over the semester before commenting about the value of this project as an effective learning technique.

A challenge for any instructor using the service-learning pedagogy would be in discovering how to capture that positive “halo effect” immediately following the service-learning project. How can those
important insights and lessons learned through the service project be continued throughout the course? The students offered the suggestion to get together again for another service-learning project during the semester, or to choose a project that would be on-going (tutoring or recreational programs for children, maintaining a community garden) over the entire course. This would allow the teams to work together and learn about and from each other over an extended period, which was a benefit discussed by students in both classes.

**Theme six: Experiences with people they never would have met otherwise**

One of the purposes of this project was for first year students to meet graduate students who may be working in offices or providing services that new students would need during their first semester on a college campus. The positive reactions reported by both first year and graduate students to having an opportunity to talk with people they would not otherwise have spoken to was a favorable and intended outcome of the service-learning project. Part of this result may have been attributed to the intentional pairing of students with others who were distinctly different in a variety of ways, or those whom the instructor noted had not interacted much in classes held up to that point. The assignment of students to groups was not positively viewed by all the students in the class, but as one student observed, “*Not only did it pull two classes together to work toward a common goal, there was a genuine task at hand. It was not something that was artificial such as a bonding or team-building game. I think that helped people let their true colors show, more so than trying to manufacture an activity would have.*” When dissimilar people work toward a similar goal there are opportunities to connect on a deeper level and find commonalities of purpose rather than focus on individual differences. Another student stated, “*I feel that the greatest value of an activity like this was the contact between the classes. All too often ‘freshmen’ or ‘graduate students’ can be abstract terms that we read about or talk about, but this put a face, a voice, and an attitude on those terms.*” The purposes of the class service-learning project seemed to be met as students expressed that they were able to learn about others while participating in a worthwhile activity.

**Teaching/learning implications:**

As a method to introduce students to other people in different sections of the same course, different majors, or with substantially different backgrounds and experiences, cooperative participation in a service-learning project creates an environment where real learning takes place. Rhoads (1997)
reported that community service was important because students made connections with their inner-selves as well as with other volunteers.

There are many opportunities on a college campus for students in different classes to engage together in a service-learning project that would enhance each course's learning outcomes. As pointed out by one student, working together on a service-learning project provides an opportunity for students to genuinely interact and be themselves that is hard to create within a classroom setting alone. There is a shared purpose for the interaction and this collective group work, with opportunities for reflection afterwards, builds bonds between individuals that discussion, group projects, even cooperative in-class work cannot attempt to provide. Sax & Astin (1997) reported that students who participated in service projects had a greater "...knowledge of different races/cultures, (and) acceptance of different races/cultures..." (p. 29) than did non-participants. An additional outcome of this service-learning project, however, was that in addition to learning about others, students reported learning more about themselves as well.

**Theme seven: A new awareness of their personal skills and competencies**

A final learning experience that emerged from this research about the service-learning projects included students' awareness of their strengths and abilities. Some of these were realizations about simple likes and dislikes, while others' learning was more focused on career choice or work-related skills.

Several students reported learning that they were task-oriented and would have preferred to focus on the work at hand rather than meeting and interacting with others. Another reported learning that she was a perfectionist about responsibilities or tasks assigned to her, and made it her responsibility to see that others were doing their best. A number of students reported that you only "get back" what you give to a project. One student explained that comment in this way, "I think the level of value you receive from the experience depends on the attitude you have going into the project. If you look at it as a learning experience it is expected that you will find something to take from project. On the other hand if you look at the service project just as work or a grade, it probably will not mean as much."

For some of the first year students, developing various competencies and establishing themselves in a new location and in college provided enough of a challenge so the learning they reported as having acquired through this process was more concrete. For instance, one student indicated, "I have
Another first-year student shared that “helping paint the house for the victims of the hurricane reinforced the notion that students are a part of the community.” This realization of becoming associated to the local community was an especially important, although unanticipated, learning outcome because all but one of the students in the classes were from locations outside the community where they attended college.

Some of the student realizations related to what they did not or could not do. For instance, one student expressed, “when I saw others doing an inadequate job, instead of motivating them to do better, I merely did the job myself. It became more important to me to do a great job and fulfill my own expectations, than to teach and inspire others to do a great job together.” Many students had never painted or done yard work and one male student expressed concern in this way, “I was nervous because I have never really painted an inside of a house before but when I noticed that nobody else knew how to paint also, I felt better.” Following the service-learning project, in the journals and class discussions, students in both classes reflected that they now felt able to take on an unfamiliar task, such as painting or landscape work, and this project had given them the self-confidence to try something new.

**Teaching/learning implications:**

Both groups of students reported levels of confidence in their abilities to interact with new people, and for graduate students a reported confidence in their choice of career as a college administrator. Astin and Sax (1998) also found that students who participated in any sort of service-learning reported increased social self-confidence that was developed as a result of that service experience. For first-year students, this confidence might manifest itself in more successful campus and community adjustment, and stronger relationships with both peers and faculty on campus. Astin (1984) has written that students who have well-developed relationships with peers and faculty, and who are interested and involved in their campus experience, both inside and outside of the classroom, learn more across a spectrum of different positive outcomes. Offering students the opportunity to work together on a service-learning project and establish themselves in a new environment can promote achievement both academically and socially.
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand what graduate and undergraduate students gained by participating in a one-time service-learning project. A major outcome was for each class of students to meet, relate to, and learn from and about the other. A secondary purpose of the project was to validate the impact of using a service-learning project as a teaching and learning methodology. This section will focus on implications for using service-learning as a pedagogical tool in both graduate and undergraduate college courses.

Using a service-learning project allows students to better understand relevant course content whether in an undergraduate or graduate course. Hands-on experiential learning allows concepts to be deeply embedded, and can be more effective in driving home a point than reading, lecturing, or facilitated discussion alone. In this case, graduate students were able to experience first-hand the sorts of issues, concerns, and habits of first year undergraduates. They were able to compare what they read about first year students to their own personal interactions with these students while working together. This sort of learning laboratory was a very effective method to understand the first year college student culture from more of an insider point of view.

Both undergraduate and graduate students also reported increased commitment to their campus community, which according to Sax and Astin (1997) is a short-term effect of courses that included a service-learning project. This was recognized by one graduate student who indicated, “By integrating community service into the educational environment and including both graduate students and first year students, they (the students) are able to learn from each other and in the process, give back to the community in which they are living.” This type of active learning is important because it spans all types of course subject matter. As faculty, many times we tend to focus on the amount of content to be covered, rather than the method used to cover specific topics. Learning facts or certain subject matter does not always stay with students. The hands-on applied activities and life lessons learned through doing and serving, particularly with a group of peers, could help turn short-term benefits into longer lasting commitment to others and to the community. Sax and Astin (1997) state, “Service-learning not only enriches traditional course content by giving the student the opportunity to ‘test’ or ‘demonstrate’ abstract
theory in the real world, it also improves the quality of service being performed by giving it an intellectual underpinning” (p. 26).

Some students in both classes were troubled by the thought of being forced to “volunteer” for a part of a class assignment. They believed that a person should only volunteer because they wanted to do so… that’s what the word “volunteer” means, they said. This sort of argument should be anticipated and the instructor can have a strong rationale prepared that addresses the benefits of completing a service-learning project to the individuals, the community, and to the class as a whole (see for example: Ehrlich, 2000; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003). Using a class activity, such as Zoom (Banyai, 1995) as referenced earlier, can help provide the necessary connection between the class content, the anticipated learning outcomes, and the service-learning project and help to build support for using this pedagogy to enhance student learning.

**Recommendations for the Future**

After the implementation of this service-learning project, and through review of student comments about their learning in papers, journals, and course evaluations, the following changes to the service-learning assignment were recommended. Students suggested that the class discussions be held jointly so that everyone could benefit from what others had learned. Another strong recommendation from students was for this service-learning research study to be conducted again to examine whether or not the reported learning outcomes and themes were consistent among different classes.

Future research could address use of a service-learning project in the same classes with different instructors. I do not teach the first year LinC class, but I have paired up with a colleague who does and we look forward to seeing whether student learning is affected by having different instructors teaching the two classes. It would also be interesting to see if information presented in class about issues such as poverty, homelessness, or mental illness, would affect student learning during a service-learning project, or whether the learning reported by students would be deeper or more substantial because of the prior introduction to the issues.

As a whole, this service-learning project assisted students in their learning over a greater span of outcomes than was originally anticipated. As reflected in the following statement from a first year student, “The most rewarding service activity I have ever been involved in was cleaning up the child care center.”
there was also a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction that accompanied their learning. For students to report this level of learning after completing one service-learning assignment is certainly worth the effort it took to develop and coordinate such a project. Imagine what could be possible using this teaching methodology within the same course multiple times!
References


The Process of Implementing a Paperless Classroom in Teacher Education Using an Electronic Portfolio System

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Abstract

This is the story of one teacher education instructor’s journey towards a paperless classroom for her secondary methods course. Because of a then new teacher education requirement implementing an electronic portfolio system, this teacher chose to make use of the system by requiring all assignments for the class to be turned in and graded through the system, along with having her syllabus in the e-portfolio system and incorporating the message board into her coursework.
This is the story of one teacher education instructor’s experience in growing the administration and instruction of a paperless course. I am not technology proficient, but I am not a technophobe either. Because of the situations at my university, I fell into having a paperless classroom. The change was gradual, and it continues to be so. Here begins the story of the evolution of my paperless classroom in my Secondary Teacher Education Methods course.

Hello, my name is Barb. I am a teacher education instructor, and I have a confession to make. I have a paperless classroom. I don’t think what I do is a lot different than what other faculty do, but in a university or college of education that is technology deficient as far as integration is concerned, this is a novel idea. I didn’t make a big deal out of going paperless, but once one person in an administrative position found I was doing this, everyone found out. This was not an occurrence that took place overnight, rather it evolved over three years and continues to evolve to make my life as a professor easier, and also to make the lives of my students easier.

My current paperless classroom is evident at many levels. There are three portfolios for the class: one portfolio consists of the syllabus, including a written explanation of assignments, due dates, and a tentative schedule. Various readings for class can also be accessed in the syllabus packet in the electronic portfolio. When assignments are due, students submit their documents through another portfolio that includes all of their written work. I grade them online, and they receive their grades and my comments through the e-portfolio system. When needed, my students and I use another portfolio as a message board available in the e-portfolio system as a communication tool between classmates, and also to communicate with me in place of e-mail.

Paperless classrooms are not the same as distance learning. Unlike distance learning courses, I still meet with my students twice a week for 1 hour and 15 minutes. Distance learning is defined as learning in which the instructor and student are separated by either time or distance (http://cops.uwf.edu/tutorials/technolo/distance/distance.htm Retrieved March 2006). In teacher education courses, some teacher-student contact may be required to teach methodology or show examples. In distance learning, all communication is online and students and faculty rarely meet. There may be a blended classroom where a teacher may meet with the students half the time or less, and then meet electronically either synchronously or asynchronously, and this can work with some teacher education
courses as well. With my paperless classroom, the classroom still meets and discussions are still held live, with all people in the classroom, but papers and grading are all done electronically. In addition, a paperless classroom does not necessarily have to be in a computer lab. The classroom in which I teach has one computer connected to the internet with a projection screen, but the students are still sitting with their notebooks and folders, and they use technology outside of class time.

In reviewing my experiences of growing my own paperless classroom, various steps have become evident in my growing process: Exploration, Papers In / Papers Out, One-Way Communication and Interactive Communication. In this paper, I will explain each of the steps, and also attempt to explain why I think my paperless classroom happened as it did, what obstacles I encountered, and perceived student reactions.

**Step One:**

*Exploring the Possibilities*

In the Fall semester of year one, the Council for Teacher Education, which is the governing body of all thirty-seven teacher education programs across the university, announced the future requirement of an electronic portfolio system where all teacher education candidates would be required to complete specific performance based assignments and they would be embedded in specific courses, to be assessed through the e-portfolio system by the instructor of that course. The cost of the e-portfolio system would be covered through the students purchasing a four-year membership to use the program, and the university would only be responsible for administrative and training costs. These assignments to be placed in the portfolio would not be implemented fully until the following school year, however, faculty were expected to require something from their class in the e-portfolio so that students could learn how to utilize the system. I chose to test the system out with just the framework for the future required assignments. I went through faculty training and implemented some of the requirements into my courses. I learned about the requirements that would be embedded in the coursework, particularly those for which I would be responsible.

As I learned about the e-portfolio system and incorporated the assignments in my classes, the reactions from the students were not as positive as I would have liked. The purpose of the e-portfolio system was not explained in enough detail to students in their training sessions, and students were not
happy about the added expense. For those students who would only be utilizing the system for one or two semesters before graduation, they complained because it was not being used enough for the amount of money they had spent on it.

**Step Two:**

**Papers In / Papers Out**

In the fall semester of year two teacher education assignments and rubrics were required of all Pre-service teachers. Assignments, templates and assessments were all in place in the e-portfolio system. Because I would have at least two assignments mandated by teacher education that had to be placed in the e-portfolio by my students, I had made a decision that having some items turned into me electronically and other items turned in to me as a paper copy during class time was not in my best interest, and I chose to make one of my classes paperless by requiring all assignments to be turned in through the e-portfolio. After all, the purpose of technology and computers should be to provide improved support of classroom instruction (McLean, D, 1996), and I had believed that utilizing the e-portfolio system for all papers coming in to me and being returned would do just that. This would benefit the students because they were taking my class one semester or two semesters prior to student teaching, and they would need to know how to use the e-portfolio on their own when the student taught away from the university. The best way to know how is to practice. In addition, students pay just under $80 for the e-portfolio membership and they might as well get their money’s worth out of it. In regards to time management, passing back papers during a short class time can be time consuming with short class meetings, and with the e-portfolios, they get their feedback and their assessment back as soon as I finish grading.

Students’ thoughts on the use of the e-portfolio system changed with a little bit of time and communication. Once a complete explanation of the e-portfolio system was given to the students (teacher education requirements as part of the accreditation process), and the reason behind why I chose to use it to a fuller extent (they spend the money on it, they might as well use it to get their money’s worth), students understood and did not complain quite as much.

At this level of implementation, the obstacles that took place had to do with lack of student training. Some students did not know how to use the e-portfolio system, as they had not been given

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proper instructions on creating and sharing documents, and viewing feedback. In addition, students preferred to make attachments in their e-portfolios, and sometimes I did not have the same software they did to open the documents. I had to require them to copy and paste their word documents and any other documents directly into the e-portfolio system.

In the spring semester of year two, I made a template for my students to submit all assignments via the e-portfolio system in one portfolio that could be sent back and forth from student to instructor and back again instead of in separate or individual projects. Prior to making this template, students were making individual projects and submitting them separately. This was time consuming for the students and lacked organization for both the students and me as their instructor. At first, this was a problem with students as they continued to create more than one portfolio, which did not ease up the time required for submitting assignments as it should have. In addition, students did not know how to re-share their portfolio with the instructor because this was not something that was required in other classes.

At first, I did not call my classroom paperless. Students still purchased a paper syllabus from the copy shop on campus. This included the syllabus, explanation of every assignment, and supplemental readings outside of the textbook. Students solely turned in all assignments through the e-portfolio system. The items were entered into the system and shared with me to review/assess and submit back to the student. Technically, the only item that changed from prior years to this year was the method of how students turned in papers and how I returned papers to them. I then added an online grade book used through another system so that students could track their grades.

During this same semester, administration and other faculty heard about the method of using the e-portfolio system, and soon thereafter I was asked to coordinate the e-portfolio system for all teacher education at the university: 5000 students, 400 full and part time faculty within 37 different teacher education programs. I still had teaching responsibilities, but with my new title, I was compelled to test the system and see how much it could do for faculty and students.

In the fall semester of the third year, student teachers had requirements completed in the e-portfolio system. The teacher education requirements were now fully implemented. In my classroom, I continued with a portfolio template for assignment submissions and feedback.
Step Three:

Exploring the possibilities: One way communication / Information

In the summer before the fourth year, I began to work with a group of faculty from various teacher education programs across campus to improve communication and understanding of the e-portfolio system. Some of these liaisons took it upon themselves to learn how to place their complete syllabus into the e-portfolio system. They also showed me how they kept meeting notes, vitae, annual reports and promotion and tenure information in the system. I then used what I learned from them so that now my paperless classroom includes a syllabus. Because of this group, I am not the only one who is trying to use the mandated e-portfolio system as part of a paperless classroom.

In the fall of the fourth year, the Curriculum and Instruction Department where I teach chose to omit copying of syllabi for classes. All syllabi were purchased by students through a packet at copy services, or they were to get the syllabi online. At first, people are not happy about this, but when paper is the biggest expense in the department outside of salaries, there has to be some way to cut corners. Since the e-portfolio platform is already a requirement for teacher education students and faculty, placing syllabi and assignments in the same platform is an easy solution, and faculty do not have to know how to manage a web page. Utilizing the e-portfolio system is just a one-way method, but under the circumstances it works well for teacher education candidates and the faculty who teach them. For the fall semester, I had the syllabus in the e-portfolio system, but I also required the syllabus packet to be purchased from copy services, as I was not yet comfortable with the syllabus packet being completely online. However, by spring of the fourth year, all students obtained their syllabus packets through the e-portfolio system.

Some of the obstacles in getting the syllabus completely into the e-portfolio system included time for organization and finding on-line readings or readings to place into an electronic format that I originally had in their printed syllabus packets. Technical challenges of students were handled prior to them being enrolled in the class because the e-portfolio system was a requirement for teacher education, and any problems they might have had along the way were alleviated prior to beginning the methods course.
Step Four:  

Interactive Communication: Message Boards

In the fall semester of the fourth year, my paperless classroom tested out the message board feature in the e-portfolio. At that time, I did not require participation of the class and made it completely voluntary so that numbers would be fewer in the testing phase. For spring semester of the same year, I did require two message boards. For the beginning of the semester, I asked students to submit and reply by message board. Of the thirty students then enrolled in the class, twenty-seven students were impressed with the message board feature and would have liked to use it again. Three students said it was not useful as they were able to speak to their peers in class and did not think they needed that added level of communication.

Step Five: All-in-One: Syllabus, Message Boards, Papers In-Papers Out

In the fall semester of the fourth year, students were invited to bring laptops to class. At the beginning of the semester, two or three students did bring laptops in the beginning, but they stopped bringing them mid-semester, probably due to the fact that in class assignments and in class discussions did not warrant the use of the laptops.

However, in the spring semester of this same year four, the classroom can be considered completely paperless. The syllabus and readings are in the e-portfolio system and no materials are purchased through print services. Two assignments were required via the message board, and all graded work is turned in through the e-portfolio.

Twenty-six of twenty-eight students state they prefer the syllabus to be electronic through the e-portfolio system as compared to a purchased packet as it saves them money and it is always available for them online. In addition they had a version of the syllabus that included any updates the instructor might make for assignments or due dates. Most students appreciated the organization of handing in and receiving grades for assignments online. At the beginning of spring semester of year four, three of twenty-nine students felt uncomfortable with the use of the electronic portfolio system. However, my midterm of the same semester, only one student had concerns and dislike of the e-portfolio system.
One of the reasons I chose to have a paperless classroom (at any of the various levels) was to improve classroom organization and time management. These are both areas that teachers need to continue to improve upon so that more time can be spent on instruction. (Veenman, 1984; Freking, 2006)

Because the e-portfolio system was the required system of teacher education, many of the challenges in technology were taken care of before students enrolled in this methods course, which was taken one or two semesters prior to student teaching.

**Student and Instructor Thoughts**

Most students appreciate the organization of handing in and receiving grades for assignments. At the beginning of spring semester of the fourth year, only 3 of 29 felt uncomfortable with the e-portfolio system, and by midterm only one student had concerns and dislike of the e-portfolio system. The paperless classroom helped students be more organized, they didn’t lose work as easily, and they liked the immediate feedback on items graded. In addition, students liked the fact that they could submit their work to be graded on their own time and they did not have to wait for class time to do so.

One of the advantages to having a paperless classroom is the fact that one creates a permanent electronic trail, which helps to work towards being a more effective teacher and being more efficient in evaluations and comments to students. (Davis, D. December 2002). I believe that in teacher education in many universities, and especially in the teacher preparation programs, technology is not used for teaching and learning as much as it could be. Many faculty members are still using overheads, a paper syllabus, and one of those green grade books instead of using an excel program or an online grade book program.

Teacher education programs lag behind public schools in planning for and integrating technology (Rath, V, 2002). If we as teacher education faculty are supposed to be modeling what we want our students to be doing in the classroom, then perhaps we need to be more of the leader than the follower in incorporating technology into our own classrooms.

No research is available on the history of the paperless classroom, or the history of technology integration into the classroom unless one discusses whole teacher ed programs incorporating technology or teaching integration of technology, which does not necessarily signify that modeling takes place.
Departmental culture often impedes integration of technology into teacher education courses (Finley, L September 2004). I did not make a big deal over what I was doing; I was just trying to make my job easier as a professor. After all, that should be the purpose of integrating technology into one’s profession. Technology in teacher education has been off to a slow start at our university, especially when compared to other programs or departments.

As I begin to reflect on changes I would like to make for the next semester of teaching this course, I want to make sure that I only use technology and the e-portfolio system to make teaching and learning easier for this class. As I attempt to implement more hands-on activities and lesson plan implementation, my students will most likely meet more in small groups for practice teaching, and communicate with me and with their groups through more use of the message board. In addition, I will have my students stream the segments of their teaching videos into the e-portfolio system. Since I will not be teaching in a technology lab, most likely I will still require my students to sign an attendance sheet. However, it is very possible that the next semester will only include that one item in hard copy, paper format. Whichever way I choose to go, this will be a learning experience for my students and me.
References


The Millennials: Getting to Know Our Current Generation of Students

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Xer meets Millennial

As a new assistant professor back in the mid-1990s, sharing generational membership with my students eased the establishment of rapport. I was able to give examples and suggest applications of the material that were, for the most part anyway, relevant and meaningful to the students. In recent years, however, the reality of the generational gap now experienced between me and my students cannot be denied. Ten years ago I felt compelled to provide insight into how certain factors had shaped Generation X and, as a member of the generation myself; I could identify with and relate to some of the frustrations and motivations of Gen Xers. Now I am setting out to better understand our current generation of students: the Millennials. While Generation X is considered to include those who were born between 1961 and 1981, the Millennial Generation is typically considered to refer to those born between 1982 and 2002. Following a description of the primary ways that I have gathered information on this topic, we shall embark upon a generational overview highlighting similarities and differences between Xers and Millennials.

Methods

Two years ago I participated in a University of Minnesota Bush Foundation Grant, the general subject of which was to enhance students’ self-regulation and motivation and to develop reflexive practitioners. I selected, as the primary objective of my study, finding constructive ways to ensure that students do the assigned readings in their classes. It was during this grant period that I collected data from convenience samples of current students at the university where I teach. The data were collected through use of a focus group as well as more informal means. The latter will be described later in this article. The focus group involved 15 student participants who were asked (by an undergraduate research assistant who served as the moderator) questions about their goals and aspirations as well as the learning and studying habits they employ. Examples of some of the questions that were posed include:
What are the key factors that motivate you to attend your classes regularly? What factors act as disincentives to attending classes regularly?

Do you typically do all of the assigned readings in your classes? Why or why not?

What are the main reasons that you are in college? What do you hope to gain or get out of your college experience?

The qualitative data generated by the focus group were analyzed by means of content analysis. Themes and patterns that emerged in those data, combined with material I have read and studied about the Millennial Generation (in both popular and scholarly publications), form the basis for the following assertions and perspectives.

**Comparing and Contrasting Xers and Millennials**

It is a gross generalization to refer to a “generational character,” but scholars and pundits do so in an attempt to understand some common traits and attitudes exhibited among members of particular generations. We know that not all Baby Boomers were anti-war activists, and not all Gen Xers were slackers. In the same way, traits ascribed to the Millennials are generalizations that certainly won’t apply to every individual.

Generation Xers experienced few, if any, defining events in their formative years. In the shadow of the Baby Boomers, the Xers suffered from a generational identity crisis. That claim can be challenged, of course, but the label of “X” certainly casts the generation as one lacking identity and character. Our current generation of students, known by names such as “Generation Y”, “the Millennial Generation”, “Digital Natives”, “the Net Generation”, as well as “Generation Me”, clearly has defining events. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack is a major marker of the generation. Other key events include Hurricane Katrina, the war in Iraq and in Afghanistan, and heightened attention to the effects of global warming. Additionally, as Joshua Glenn (2008), notes:

> Millennials have come of age during the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations...The New Economy boomed and went bust. Broadband Internet, mobile phones, digital cameras, MP3 players, email, and the management of one’s social life via networking software ceased to be luxuries and became necessities for younger Americans.

> While Xers were faced with the likelihood that they would not experience upward social mobility, many Millennials are simply not willing to settle for less when it comes to jobs and salaries. As Millennial generation workers occupy the workplace in large numbers, we find a cohort of workers unwilling to
commit their loyalties to the boss. Less inclined to stay in unpleasant, conflict-filled, or boring workplaces, they appear poised to change jobs when something better comes along. Millennials may be ushering in new visions of the workplace. In their recent book, *Work Sucks*, Ressler and Thompson (2008) advocate for a Results-Only Work Environment, which allows for employees to deviate from the traditional 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. work schedule, miss meetings, and simply spend less time at the workplace – as long as the work does get done. Less “face time” appeals to the Millennial worker, who is accustomed to working via the laptop or BlackBerry in settings as varied as home, the coffee shop, or the subway.

Members of Generation X and the Millennial Generation are quite racially and culturally diverse. In general, members of these generations are considered tolerant and open. Anna Quindlen (2000) observes this about the Millennials:

One out of every seven of their peers is black, one out of every seven Latino, and because of that great diversity of population as well as greater openness at school and at home they do not have the lily-white illusions that colored my insular childhood, nor some of the fears of the other that have poisoned our national discourse. They have grown up seeing, and believing, that women are as capable as men...As this generation grows to adulthood it becomes ever less necessary for gay men and lesbians to follow the old conventions of deception.

The fact that the 2008 presidential democratic race was between a woman, Hillary Clinton, and an African-American, Barack Obama, illustrates growth and movement of this sort on the national stage.

Parents of the kids in both generations relied heavily upon daycare, although we heard more about latchkey children in the 1980s and 1990s. Gen Xers experienced less supervision than have Millennials. As students, Gen Xers were viewed as largely on their own. Independent, nonconformist, and rebellious are apt adjectives to describe many members of Generation X. In the words of Howe and Strauss (2003), the Gen Xer is a “scrappy, pragmatic, free-agent” (Howe and Strauss, 13). The Millennials, on the other hand, are the children of “helicopter parents”. These parents are over-involved, intrusive, and protective. Howe and Strauss identify the Millennials as “the most watched-over generation in memory.” They note: “The typical day of a child, tween or teen has become a nonstop round of parents, relatives, teachers, coaches, babysitters, counselors, chaperones, minivans, surveillance cams and curfews”. A way in which this is evidenced on college campuses is in the phone calls that professors and administrators receive from parents checking on their kids. Such calls often involve questioning of why their children aren’t getting better grades, with parents defending their children and questioning what
is going awry at the institution that would explain the trouble their children may be having there. A colleague of mine who works in advising told me about a phone call she received from a parent; the question the parent had was this: “Do you provide a wake-up call service there for the students?” My colleague’s response was: “No. This isn’t a hotel!”

The younger Gen Xers were considered to be comfortable with emerging technologies and eager to bring their skills, tools, and ideas into the workplace. For the Millennials, the rapidity of technological changes has been astounding. But, this has been their reality, and thus such changes have been “normal” for this generation. They experienced regular cell phones turn into having the capability of being camera phones; cd players giving way to MP3 players; communicating by email and instant messaging being trumped by communicating via Facebook and MySpace.

The listening (and viewing) of music for Gen Xers was affected by the birth of MTV; for Millennials the ipod has revolutionized their experiences with music. Again heeding the dangers involved in generalizing, if we were to make a statement about what type of music seemed to best capture the mood and attitude of Generation X, we would say that it was grunge. For Millennials, who have especially eclectic tastes, the generalization is even more difficult. This generation is somewhat represented by EMO (emotional rock), but musical preferences are really all over the map. In recent years, hip-hop has been especially popular among members of this generation.

During the 1990s, social psychologists wrote about “the saturated self” (Gergen 1991), in reference to identity in the postmodern era characterized by fragmentation, incoherence, and instability. The availability of new communication technologies and a bombardment of social stimuli were said to threaten the notion of a stable, authentic self. In my social psychology classes, when I discuss the concepts of the saturated self and the mutable self, I am now finding that these terms do not seem to provoke much concern or interest among the Millennials. Their “selves” may be saturated, but they don’t recognize it because this has been their experience since day one. The self in flux is normative for them. Thus, my “modern” notions of what is involved in constructing a coherent self and maintaining continuity of identity in these postmodern times (and the assertion that this is an important task for each of us) may not be viewed as a worthwhile or necessarily relevant topic of study among this generation of students.
The Millennials

The Millennial Generation is, in many ways, a generation of contrasts – e.g., they are both team-oriented and narcissistic; they are said to be optimistic, yet also cynical; they do volunteer activities but the motives are unclear: Is the volunteer work because they want to give of themselves selflessly and help others, or is it more about padding a resume? (Teens are now beginning to construct resumes in high school!) Furthermore, such volunteer activities are mandatory in some schools and colleges. We all probably have numerous anecdotes of Millennials displaying disrespectful behavior toward those in authority, yet they report admiration for their parents and are apt to adopt their parents’ ideological views rather than rebel against them. Indeed, many Millennials have a “friendship” with their parents rather than the traditional parent-child hierarchical relationship. Reporter Cecelia Goodnow quotes teen researcher and president of GTR Consulting, Gary Rudman, who said this about the Millennials: “The trend is that there isn’t a trend. This generation is all about choice – being able to find something and make it your own.” (Goodnow, 1) Such contradictory ideas about the Millennials make it more difficult to easily categorize and label the generation. Of course we know that labels and categories are always oversimplifications, so more power to the Millennials!

Millennials in the College Classroom

Challenges for both students and instructors

As already noted, I recently had the opportunity to participate in a University of Minnesota Bush Foundation Grant, the general subject of which was to enhance students’ self-regulation and motivation and to develop reflexive practitioners. The primary objective of my study was to find constructive ways to ensure that students do the assigned readings in their classes. In recent years, I have been amazed at the extent to which many college students do not do all of the assigned reading in their classes (sometimes not even obtaining the books for their courses). I would like to arrive at means of encouraging students to do the required reading in ways that are supportive and positive, rather than relying upon fear tactics. First, I need to understand where the students are coming from and what obstacles or disincentives may be involved in whether or not they complete assigned reading in their courses. I wish to share some observations based on my work related to this grant. I believe that these observations, in conjunction with the work of others who are studying the Millennials, can help to enhance our understanding of today’s students.
The Millennials

First, some results of informal data gathering I did in my Social Psychology class a few semesters ago reveal attitudes that may strike a chord with what other instructors are seeing in their students. I asked the class if they were familiar with the book, *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* by “Rebekah Nathan” (pseudonym), actually written by anthropologist Cathy Small, who became a freshman student at the university where she teaches. In essence, this is an ethnographic study of college freshman culture at a particular university. The students were not familiar with this book. I shared with them the following passage from the book: “Students mentally ask themselves a series of questions, so as to decide whether they should do the required reading in their courses:

‘Will there be a test or quiz on the material?’
‘Is the reading something that I will need in order to be able to do the homework?’
‘Will we directly discuss this in class in such a way that I am likely to have to personally and publicly respond or otherwise “perform” in relation to this reading?’

The author notes that, if the answer to all of these questions is “no,” then students don’t do the reading, or at least the probability of them not doing the reading is much higher (p. 138). I asked my students for their thoughts and reactions to this finding or assertion of the author. One student said that if the instructor is assigning reading material that is not covered on a test or in some way covered in the class, then the instructor should not be requiring it. (I suggested that instructors may recommend reading that is relevant to the subject matter of the class, such that reading it will enrich learning. This did not receive any kind of response from the group). Another student noted that if a book is boring, then she simply does not read it. One student indicated that if students will be expected to discuss reading material in the class, then this will motivate them to read. On the other hand, if the only way that their not reading the material will be reflected is through their performance on a test or quiz, then this is less of a motivator because it is private as opposed to public. One other individual said that if professors go over material in the classroom that duplicates what the textbook covers, then students do not view the reading as necessary. To summarize, then, the following are disincentives to reading (at least among this particular group of students and also among the subjects in Small’s study): a) the material is boring, b) the material is not covered on quizzes or tests, c) the students are not required to discuss the material in class, and d) the in-class lectures duplicate the reading.
Results from a focus group conducted with 15 student participants at the university where I teach, moderated by an undergraduate research assistant (I played the role of “observer/note-taker”), uncovered similar sentiments. Students indicated that they will more likely read the material if they know they will need to participate in class discussion on the basis of the reading. The students identified the following disincentives for reading: the textbook is written in a way that is hard to get through (“some are just written like crap”), the professor doesn’t test on what is in the book, and the reading is not directly tied into what is discussed in class. The focus group participants were asked the reasons they are in college, and many of them responded by saying that it was expected; the next step after high school. One student, clearly aware of privileges afforded him due to his social class location, observed: “I am from a white, suburban family. I had the option of going to college.” The majority of responses focused on college being a vehicle for a better job and making more money.

Incidentally, back in 1999, I collected data from a convenience sample of 154 undergraduate students (i.e., primarily Gen Xers). One of the questionnaire items was, “What are the main reasons that you are in college?” The most common responses revolved around getting an education as a preparation for a meaningful career. But the following comments reflect goals or motives that are more in synch with what many of us feel is the mission of a liberal arts education:

“To get an education, broaden my knowledge, and gain independence.”

“To learn, to be opened to ideas I might not find on my own.”

“I think college is a time to cement social relationships and find out who you are and where you want to go in life.”

“To find myself and to educate myself – in that order.”

“To meet new people and expand my intellect.”

“To gain a wide range of useful knowledge and to ‘think the deep thoughts’.

“To obtain a higher education that will benefit my moral, spiritual and financial future.”

Certainly, there are myriad reasons our students are in college, but the pursuits of expanding one’s intellect, finding oneself, or positively affecting one’s morality do not appear to be all that prevalent among many members of the current generation. A big obstacle is that it seems as if learning in the college setting is not considered all that meaningful to many Millennial students. There is great emphasis on
“getting the degree” rather than on the process or experience of being a college student. In some cases, parents may contribute to this emphasis on “getting through,” “getting done,” “getting a job.” Given college costs, there is a lot of pressure on students to complete the degree as quickly as possible and get a good job that pays well. Parents are ever aware of the economic realities facing their children. Although it sounds cliché, it is indeed the case that the rich are getting richer, and the middle class is getting increasingly squeezed. Part of the motivation of “helicopter parents” is to do what they can to give their children an edge in a highly competitive environment. Bringing this back to what we attempt to do in the college setting, though, we realize that to the extent that the college experience is viewed as a means to this end – i.e., to “the JOB” – rather than as an end in itself, true learning and the real meaning of what many of us feel college is all about is potentially lost. Certainly, there are real, practical concerns and considerations – students DO pay a lot of tuition and incur huge amounts of debt; they want to know that getting the college degree is going to help them secure good employment. If this is the primary goal or idea about college, then it seems to invite a student perspective that is not consistent with what it means to be in a community of learners.

Another significant (and related) obstacle, of course, is the fact that many of our students work at jobs that end up competing for their time. Students need to learn how to best manage their time and how to prioritize their school and work obligations. As instructors, we may indeed be understanding of the challenges our students face (with respect, for example, to the incurring of huge debt and the attempt to manage and balance everything they have going on), yet we must be careful not to compromise standards and expectations. Each instructor must arrive at particular strategies and approaches for reaching the students and nurturing a positive learning environment. As we work on being more reflective in what we do as instructors, we can model this for our students who will become more reflective themselves. This may, in part, help to facilitate students’ taking more responsibility for their learning. On one level, this could mean that students read the required books for their courses. On another level, it could mean that students appreciate the intrinsic value of what it means to be immersed in the college setting.
How to connect with such “connected” students

The ubiquity of cell phones and ipods among our students raise legitimate questions about the effect on attention span and entertainment expectations (as well as ways that technological gadgets provide new and clever vehicles for cheating). Some experts even assert that engagement with all of this technology alters the brain. What are the pedagogical implications? Certainly, instructors have increasingly felt the pressure to make the classroom environment entertaining and fun in an attempt to keep students’ attention and interest. To accommodate the demand many students have for rapid response, some instructors (especially in large lecture courses) are now using “clickers”, which allow students to respond to a quick poll in class or take practice tests the instructor administers. And they get immediate results. This demand for immediacy, in general, is posing potential misunderstandings between instructors and students. When a student calls or emails a professor, there seems to be an expectation that the professor will respond almost instantaneously. This suggests an expectation of “customer service”, which typically does not match the ways in which instructors at colleges and universities envision academe. Certainly, this is an area where instructors and students need to attempt taking the role of the other. Differing expectations need to be communicated in order to make understanding and negotiation possible.

New technologies allow for people to be expressive and creative in ways that were unimaginable in the past. Some instructors are providing their students opportunities to use the mediums they are comfortable and familiar with in particular class assignments. This might mean students turn in a video-documentary, create a website, or maintain a blog. Experiential activities, opportunities for creative use of available technologies, and a learning environment that is entertaining and exciting are typically preferred over and above traditional lecture formats in classes.

Future Directions

Where do we go from here? Additional studies need to be conducted which will test some of the implied propositions suggested here and elsewhere. We must be cautious about generalizing from non-probability samples. It would be especially helpful, I think, for researchers to consider how social class shapes the experiences and expectations of members of the Millennial generation. Much of the existing research clearly has a middle/upper-middle class bias.
An issue that has obvious relevance for college professors is what kind of pedagogy works best for the Millennial student. But, in considering this, we must also ask: How much should professors be expected to change how they teach? What is reasonable? If professors accommodate the Millennial students by incorporating more technology, less traditional lecture, and greater opportunity for experiential learning, is something also lost? If so, does it matter?

Much attention has been given to the role of technology among Millennials. We must continue to examine how certain technological tools both help and hinder individuals’ ability to communicate. More particularly, how does the heavy reliance upon email and texting impact one’s ability to effectively communicate face-to-face? Are appendages like cell phones and ipods resulting in the alienation of oneself from the ongoing social process of which we are all a part? What are individual and social consequences of this phenomenon?

We can anticipate that there will be additional research and speculation on the ways in which work place culture(s) will be affected by Millennials entering the work force in greater numbers. When this was the case for Gen Xers, some employers hired consultants with the objective of helping Boomers and Xers better understand each other and thereby work more productively and harmoniously.

Closing Words

Learning more about where students are at – their perceptions of college, future goals, and attitudes toward the college learning environment – should help instructors to know what they are dealing with, and what pedagogical techniques may work best. When the media, pundits, and professors criticized Generation Xers in the 1990s, this seemed to be done largely without consideration of the social, economic, and cultural factors affecting and shaping the Xers. We are in danger of doing this again with the Millennial Generation. While we may be inclined to fall into judgmental commentary on “kids these days” or “this generation”, we would do well to place the Millennials, contextualize their coming of age, and work toward enhanced understanding. Realities of the competition in both micro (e.g., community, school, college) and macro (American society and the world community) environments, the cultural milieu of consumerism, and the revolutionizing aspects of new technologies are significant factors influencing both the parents of Millennials and the Millennials themselves.
I feel that my participation in the Bush Foundation grant project, in conjunction with general observations of Millennials in college, reading books and articles about the generation, attending workshops (and having a Millennial step-son!) is helping me gain some insight on and understanding of forces shaping Millennials. By becoming more aware of and sensitive to the goals, aspirations, and expectations Millennials may have, we can better face the challenges those of us in older generations experience in attempting to best equip them with what they need as they enter the work force and become active citizens in the world.
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\[1\] In an article that I wrote in 1998, “Generation X: Who Are They? What Do They Want?” (published in Thought & Action), I attempted to dispel some myths about Gen Xers, provide insight into how certain factors have shaped the generation, and give a glimpse into some of the frustrations and motivations of Gen Xers.