Diversity in the Classroom - Generational Cohorts and Their Impact on the Quality of Higher Education Learning Processes in the 21st Century

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Abstract
Current and potential professionals face a common challenge: upgrade and improve their competences through further education. The diversity found in the classroom of most higher education programs, including different generational cohorts of faculty members and students represent an additional difficulty to this equation. This paper will discuss the impact of different generations in the classroom on the quality of learning processes and present the main steps of new research being developed by the Center for Workplace Diversity at University of Phoenix. The focus of this new study addresses the primary change agents’ drivers on generational values and behaviors and influence on higher educational interactions; different generational factors that drive interactions; and, the various Significant Emotional Events (SEE’s) that impact behaviors of Baby Boomers (1946 – 1964), Generation “X” (1965 – 1979), and Millenials (1980 – 1997) (DeMeuse and Mlodzik, 2010).

Introduction
The 21st Century economy poses new challenges to professionals who want to succeed or maintain a successful career through lifelong learning. They need to upgrade and improve their competences through further education, training, and professional development. Professionals in this century also face increasing responsibility, accountability, and the need for transparency in all transactions.

To comply with those new demands, educational leaders need to diversify learning approaches that are closer to the market demands, moving faster and developing new approaches for achieving not only higher effectiveness, but also efficiency. Educational institutions need to revisit its role as a form of truly and better preparing individuals to be successful participants in an economy of knowledge. New learning approaches must consider delivering a model so that the workplace is viewed as a classroom - with concern for time limitation and convenience - and the classroom as a place to learn and develop competencies that can be immediately applied in the workplace. MOOC’s and competency-based education are examples of new emerging approaches to learning (Irvine, Code, and Richards, 2013). The increasing role of online education, both synchronous and asynchronous, represents a trend in education.

**Diversity and Multicultural Classroom**

The biggest challenge faced by universities and business schools around the world should be to prepare individuals to be successful players in the global market of the 21st Century. The diversity found in the classroom of most higher education programs is a reflex of the globalized marketplace and the worldwide immigration (Banks, 2004) with different nationalities coming together in a classroom environment to learn how to better perform in a market that is multicultural by essence (Malekzadeh, 1998). At the beginning of the globalization movement in the 20th Century, multinational companies expanded their operations to new countries and markets, imposing their original products and services to a new legion of customers, without being concerned with original local needs (Yip, 1989). That was called global standardization. For that situation, education focused on the host country culture could have prepared professionals of any multinational company to be successful in any branch of the company across the world. However, in the 21st Century, companies have realized that in order to keep their profits high and
increase the number of customers worldwide, there should be more local adaptation of products and services. That finding, in turn, created the need for an increasing understanding of different cultures by those who would be working for those companies. Cross-cultural management became a must and directly impacted business education (Moran, 2011). Today, we have students from all over the world sharing online and brick-and-mortar classrooms, learning the different cultures and ways of doing business in different parts of the world.

**Generational Cohorts, Conflict, and Differences**

Different generational cohorts are in the classroom, and traditional approaches to learning conflict directly with the presence of a multimedia generation of students that are naturals in terms of dealing with mobile and information technology, making the educational process even more challenging. The different generational cohorts of faculty members and students represent another extra difficulty present in this equation.

Each generational cohort presents with attributes based upon the social, economic, and political trends of the time period. Strauss and Howe (1991) provided a generalized framework of characteristics for how cohort members react to the world around them. Research studies utilizing this theory have been conducted within the business, social science, education, and healthcare disciplines to examine such varied topics as consumer behavior; general attitudes, values, and trends; learning styles and educational resource allocation; and, recruitment, retention, and conflict management as they relate to generational differences (Fisher & Crabtree, 2009).

Comparing and contrasting generational cohort studies provides an interesting portrait of behaviors and attitudes. For example, several studies examined potential challenges presented by differences in attitudes. Millennials dislike classroom lectures and prefer collaborative group work, which is in direct contrast to the preferences expressed by Baby Boomers and some Generation Xers (Ferri-Reed, 2010). Corbo’s (1997) study revealed that Baby Boomers believe work/life balance is a form of laziness and a lack of commitment to their career; while in contrast, Generation Xers view work/life balance as a necessity to maintaining a healthy lifestyle (Mohr, Smith-Coggins, Larrabee, Dyne, & Promes, 2011). Alternately, studies reveal several
similarities between cohorts. A study by Meriac, Woehr, and Banister (2010) uncovered that work ethic is not a function of age. Research on professional conference attendance by Baby Boomers and Generation Xers disclosed that the motivators and inhibitors for attendance were the same for both cohorts (Severt, Fjelstul, & Breiter, 2009). These examples of generational cohort studies demonstrate the need for additional future research in a variety of areas.

New Research
The Center for Workplace Diversity Research will start new research to further understand all implications derived by the diversity in the classroom. It will focus on defining the primary change agents’ drivers on generational values and behaviors that influence higher educational interactions; different generational factors that drive interactions; and, the various Significant Emotional Events (SEE’s) that impact behaviors. For the purpose of the proposed study, the following generational groups are identified by the range of birth years: Baby Boomers: 1946 – 1964, Generation X: 1965 – 1979 and Millennials: 1980 – 1997 (De Meuse & Mlodzik, 2010). Significant Emotional Events (SEE’s) or Flashbulb Memories are defined individual experiences or causal behaviors and possible trigger points can be defined within each group (Brown and Kulik, 1977, 2015). For example, advancements in technology have provided and continue to provide social media opportunities that influence specific generations.

The theoretical elements of the proposed paper include grounded theory, phenomenology (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008) as both research theory and research design in exploring the various generational perceptions about social behavior and response; and educators’ experiences and perceptions about indicators of these behaviors effecting their propensity to educate and learn. Human groups, regardless of their members’ orientation, have similar basic structures, elements, dynamics, and dimensions when it comes to developing behaviors and the propensity to change (Wyatt, 1993).

Grounded theory. Grounded theory, a qualitative research method, was selected for the proposed study because of its direct relationship to discovering relevance. Glaser (2010) conceived grounded theory as a method of conceptualizing relevance within the context of vast amounts of disparate data points. The tolerance for confusion and regression is manifested in the researcher’s patience for the sense making to emerge (Glaser, 2010).
Phenomenology. Phenomenological design was appropriate because of the exploration of the participants’ source of knowledge through in-depth interviewing: worldviews formed as a result of their lived experiences and perceptions (Moustakas, 1994). Butler-Kisber (2010) posited that qualitative phenomenological research is reflective of research patience to explore repeatedly lived experiences with open-ended questions and in an honest environment. Qualitative researchers understand the richness of reflection alongside responses of participants’ lived experiences and perceptions so that their worldviews take shape and form transformative meaning (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008).

These processes and factors can be studied to determine how and if it is possible an individual or group can change their behavior. Analysis of the diverse behaviors, significant emotional events, and change agents should define the influences in higher education interactions. The group and/or individual dynamics are the basis for group cohesion, compliance, loyalty, obedience, and functioning.

References


