An Organizational Development Approach to Experiential Learning with Millennials

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ABSTRACT

The current generation of students, often labeled as Millennials, present unique challenges to ABSEL educators. Certain characteristics of Millennials can produce a potential source of resistance to learning by means of experiential learning and simulation. This paper develops conceptual models based on organizational development approaches to change that can address newly emerging trends towards a preference in current students for simplicity and economy in data/information processing as opposed to the requisite willingness to address systemic complexity. Societal trends towards Millennial personality traits, including narcissism, are also examined. The characteristics of classic organizational development technologies and Millennial culture are interwoven to identify potential hindrances and opportunities for experiential learning and simulation.

INTRODUCTION

Over the generations of ABSEL scholarship, a large number of conceptual models and learning theories have been applied to address both challenges and opportunities in ABSEL's realm of experiential learning and simulation. These approaches have ranged from the micro to the macro, touching all points in between. Many conceptual and theoretical models have been applied, each differing from the others in the content of the approach. While there have been some areas of consensus and agreement in ABSEL scholarship over the years, the majority of these approaches have focused on different content models without achieving an overall level of consensus or general agreement. This paper intends to address not the challenge of finding the "best fit" model or conceptual approach; rather, the intent here is to address ABSEL scholarship challenges as challenges of process rather than content. The tool utilized to accomplish this task centers on the process techniques utilized in the field of classical organizational development, all the while keeping an eye on the challenges that come with the current Millennial student generation.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Organizational Development (OD) practitioners utilize numerous types of interventions driven by differing conceptual schemas. Early OD work, emphasizing a behavioral perspective, included practitioners and theorists such as Argyris (1970) --- intervention theory, Dyer (1987) --- team building, and Schein (1987) --- process consultation. Over the years, the OD professional field has moved beyond solely focusing on behavioral approaches. Approaches such as work redesign, large group interventions and whole system interventions have evolved as OD has tackled more and more complex challenges. However, in order to keep the presentation focused, and since this paper focuses on implementing the process dimension in challenging educational settings, the OD schemas discussed and evaluated here will focus on the more behavioral side of OD.

Despite the evolution of the OD field, evidence exists that change programs are rarely implemented fully, and even more rarely are they implemented smoothly (Beer, Eisenstat & Spector, 1990; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008). Beck, Bruderl & Woywode (2008) contrast change program momentum with forces that produce deceleration. Human and/or organizational factors are also cited as reasons for resistance to change or for the lack of successful change implementation (Furst & Cable, 2008; Hrebiniak, 2006). For this paper, the focus is on human factor aspects of narcissism and complexity avoidance, identified as characteristics of the Millennial generation, as potential hindrances to successful process implementations in experiential learning and simulation settings.

NARCISSISM

Narcissism has been studied by researchers from various fields, the first of which was psychology (Freud, 1914; Ellis, 1927; O'Malley, 1929). The term stems from the legends of Narcissus, who was in love with his own image (Ellis, 1927). Narcissism has evolved over the years to have a more complex meaning. Bergman, Westerman, & Daly (2010: 119) define narcissism as a term that is used " to describe activities, behaviors or experiences that serve to maintain or enhance a grandiose, yet vulnerable self…those high in narcissism display a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, self-focus, and self-importance" (also see Carson, Butcher & Coleman, 1988: Millon, 1996).

Narcissistic individuals can be described as vain, self-absorbed, egotistical, conceited, and self-important. These people are self-serving and have a need to succeed at any cost (Hoover, 2015). This can lead to a variety of negative effects at work and in learning environments. Hoover (2015: 4) states narcissists "impact the dynamics of healthy behavioral processes." Chatterjee and Hambrick (2007) also found this to

be true when they connected CEO narcissism to unstable company performance. This has specific implications for learning. Narcissistic individuals can be characterized by being resistant to constructive criticism (Hoover, 2015). They will attempt to reject any information that disconfirms their self-absorbed and egotistical beliefs.

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) was developed by Raskin & Hall (1979). This 40 item survey measures narcissism as a personality trait. It is based on the definition of narcissistic personality disorder in the DSM-III, however it is not used to diagnose participants. In this survey, participants must choose one of two statements that they most accurately identify with. For example, a participant would choose one of the following statements: "Modesty doesn't become me." Or "I am essentially a modest person." The former statement is the more narcissistic statement, indicating that the person who chooses it, may be a more narcissistic person.

Members of the current generation have been labeled as the Millennial Generation, born between the years 1977 and 2000. Evidence exists that one of the characteristics of these so-called Millennials is a propensity for narcissism (Bergman, Westerman & Daly, 2010; Westerman, Bergman, Bergman & Daly, 2010). Other characteristics of Millennials that could come into play in experiential and simulation settings have been identified by Twenge and Campbell (2008): 1) higher self-esteem, 2) narcissism, 3) anxiety, 4) depression, 5) lower need for social approval, 6) more external locus of control orientation, and, 7) more agentic traits such as assertiveness, especially for women.

COMPLEXITY AVOIDANCE

Complexity avoidance, briefly defined here, is a term that refers to a pattern of behaviors that can be observed as existing in Millennials. As Hoover (2011) observes:

"Complexity avoidance comes into play when the question of simulation/exercise simplicity versus complexity is addressed. Cannon, Freisen, Lawrence & Feinstein (2009), as well as many other ABSEL scholars, have looked at the simplicity question, differentiating between the states of complexity resulting from too much information (information overload) and complexity resulting from too little (uncertainty) … Millennials are more comfortable in states of relative uncertainty and simplicity in the absence of information because of their inherent avoidance of complexity. As such, there is a danger that Millennials may be predisposed to lower the definition of what we, as simulation and experiential learning educators, would consider as adequate to implement adequate learning standards."

In the broadest sense, complexity avoidance refers to a tendency to prefer simplicity and economy in data/information processing. This tendency is in opposition to the requisite willingness often needed to address systemic complexity. We assert that Millennials, who have grown up with internet search (as just one example of a number of generational technological and social changes) as omnipresent, have become addicted to a quick fix mentality, and are therefore often impatient with those matters that involve processes that require patience or perseverance.

Millennials have spent their intellectual lives in a pattern of being "delivered to" as opposed to "seeking out". As a result, they may not have not developed the skill set or tools requisite for digging out information that can lead to enhanced perspectives. Nassim Nicholas Taleb in his book *Fooled by Randomness* (2005) talks about the importance of separating noise and signal. His point, of course, is that effectiveness is sourced in looking at relevant signals as opposed to distracting noise. However, signal focus requires discipline. In addition, noise creates more negative impressions. Complexity avoidance behaviors tend to focus on short-term feedback that is comforting in its immediacy, as opposed to systemic complexities more functional in a long-term horizon world. Millennial complexity avoiders therefore can fall into patterns of processing information in a superficial or shallow manner, and are therefore further removed from signal. Ironically, this generational phenomenon has emerged in a world rife with more signals and more noise than any time in human history.

Richard Louv's book *Last Child in the Woods* (2005), laments the fact that the so-called modern generation is further and further removed from the experience and appreciation of nature. He quotes a fourth grader from San Diego as saying, "I like to play indoors 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are". Such a statement epitomizes the relationship between today's youth and the technologically dependent society in which they live.

Millennials, having spent thousands of hours playing video and computer games by the time they get to college, have the eye-hand coordination of a micro-surgeon. Moreover, they have undoubtedly become equally proficient in processing images, sensing spatial relationships, and other game-related skills. These talents and capacities have produced a generation of people who have become super-fast data receivers. However, if that data receipt has been both effortless and almost infinite in its manifestations, it all too easy for Millennials to fall into patterns that reflect not only a lack of interest in the process of data interpretation, but also a potential lack of intellectual curiosity. As an example of effortless and virtually infinite information, a January 2013 Googling (now a verb) of "signal and noise" produced a list in 17/100 of a second of 131 million responses. Furthermore, our good friends from Google were nice enough to sort the 131 million responses according to their proprietary algorithm (which they do not share), so that there is little inherent need to go beyond the first couple of pages.

Ruth Marcus, in a *Washington Post* editorial (2010) makes the following observation --- "The late Senator Daniel Moynihan liked to say that everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts. In the modern update, no one would be entitled to either; dissenting opinions are not tolerated. Facts that clash with preconceived ideas must be ignored if not denied outright." If Millennials are prone to complexity avoidance, prefer simplicity and economy in data/information processing, and have a lack of signal focus requisite to address systemic complexity, they fall into some of the same patterns found in narcissism. Narcissists are hyper-sensitive to information that supports their inflated self-image, while also reacting harshly to and being highly resistant to information that disconfirms their perceptions of grandiosity. The potential impact of these tendencies will be examined in the OD intervention model that follows.

ARGYRIS' INTERVENTION THEORY AND METHOD

Many would argue that Chris Argyris and the OD intervention model he outlined in his classic work *Intervention Theory and Method* (Argyris, 1970), provided a model that helped to formulate the field of Organizational Development. His basic model consisted of three steps; Argyris felt that these steps needed to be followed in sequence in order to cement

lasting organizational change. In this section, we will outline the Argyris model as a useful framework for analysis, and illustrate how the elements of narcissism and complexity avoidance might interfere with processes leading to successful implementation of organizational change and personal/ developmental learning.

The three stages/steps of the Argyris model are: 1) the generation and use of valid information, 2) free, informed choice based on the information produced, concluding with the outcome of 3) internal commitment. This internal commitment, being intrinsically sourced, is seated in the individual; however, the model also points out that if the two precedent stages of valid information generation and free, informed choice happen to not be in place, then lasting commitment to organizational change and personal development, or even initial commitment to these goals, may become improbable.

Valid Information

All humans are subject to selective screening of data and of potential filtering of information. In particular, the human tendency is to filter out that which is disconfirming to current point of view and/or disconfirming to their self-image. This is the basic rationale for all forms of cognitive dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957). In the effort to instill valid information, every OD interventionist or educator has undoubtedly uttered (or wanted to utter) the following phrase at some point in a change program, intervention or classroom exercise --- "You need to hear this, really!"

The importance of getting valid information in place is a challenge that OD practitioners face; it is also an ongoing challenge for experiential learning and simulation practitioners. The challenge is to get potential learners sufficiently fine-tuned into and aligned with the information relevant to their learning. An inability to accomplish this goal will produce inevitable intervention failure and failure to learn, because, by default, decisions are then being made by participants based on incorrect, faulty, or incomplete information. Note that tendencies for complexity avoidance, to the extent they exist in the organization or classroom, will automatically function to reduce the amount of information produced in the OD or learning process. By reducing the amount of extant information being examined, the power of the status quo (including the forces that sustain ignorance) increases proportionately. Therefore, complexity avoidance yields an inherent conservatism that makes resistance to organizational change and individual change easier to manifest.

The other question at hand is how this challenge plays in the realms of narcissism and collective narcissism (collective narcissism develops when a group demonstrates narcissistic behavior patterns). The peculiar dynamics of narcissism come into play here. Narcissism's hunger for grandiosity can only be fed from external sources. Therefore, the narcissist must rely on social sources for information supportive of inflated self-importance. However, at the same time, narcissists suffer from a lack of empathy and a generalized lack of a capacity to see things as others see them. The combination of these two factors yields a set of dynamics wherein narcissists have a harder time hearing feedback from others while they simultaneously need the feedback that confirms their grandiosity. The conclusion on this point is that while all people tend to engage in processes of selective screening and filtering, narcissists are hyper-functional in this regard. Therefore, narcissists are particularly challenged when it comes to both generating and utilizing valid information. As such, narcissists, as organizational participants and as potential learners, offer a uniquely viral form of resistance to organizational change and individual change as valid information is both minimized and distorted to serve the narcissist's own purposes.

Free, Informed Choice

Free, informed choice becomes largely irrelevant if valid information is not generated since decisions would be made in such a case utilizing invalid or incorrect information. Once again, complexity avoidance would automatically function to reduce the number of choices being considered. However, let us put the probability of a reduced amount of valid information and/or free choices to consider aside. Instead, let us look at free choice assuming that the system is, in fact, awash in valid information as it most often is in OD interventions and classroom exercises. How might narcissists and collective narcissists handle free, informed choice?

An intervention that is designed to change an organizational system or sub-system is necessarily a collective endeavor in that system or sub-system. Organizational change is not individual change, and thus organizational change requires meaningful levels of collaboration and teamwork. If the members of the group are stable and mature individuals, in a free, informed choice environment, all other things being equal, they will function collectively to produce positive and productive outcomes.

In a similar fashion, learning and individual change is a collective endeavor when both the student and the instructor share a common set of learning goals. Collaboration between the two parties is essential to maximize learning outcomes. If the potential learners are stable and mature individuals, and if the instructor is professional and thorough when it comes to learning program design and execution --- then, in a free, informed choice environment, all other things being equal, they will function collectively to produce positive and productive learning outcomes.

Narcissists, however, have fragile self-concepts (Bergman, et al, 2010). As such, they are hyper-sensitive to feedback that may disconfirm or threaten that fragile self-concept. Disconfirmation of a grandiose self-image can lead to feelings or anger or embarrassment that can produce aggressive and/or anti-social behavior directed against the source of that perceived threat (Stucke & Sporer, 2002). As such, narcissists may be too potentially volatile to function successfully in environments characterized by free, informed choice. In a learning environment, narcissists may perceive any feedback that is disconfirming to their inflated self-image to be incorrect. They will therefore often blame the instructor, the textbook, their teammates, etc. for their own individual failures. This is opposed to having a sense of intellectual curiosity, learning from feedback to correct flaws, and desiring to advance against the forces of self-serving ego in order to grow in areas of personal development.

Given their tendency to externalize failure, narcissists may be a ticking time bomb in group efforts such as experiential learning exercises or simulation activities where collaboration is fueled by a large number of alternatives under consideration and where information is exchanged freely and openly. Furthermore, the narcissists' tendency to a sense of self-entitlement (Beck, et al, 1990) may attune them to only adopting, and perhaps also only considering, those choices that support their self-perceived status in the system. As a result, narcissists may not only become disengaged in a free, informed choice environment, they may also become a source of active

resistance or even aggression.

Internal Commitment

Finally, on the point of free, informed choice, Argyris's approach would seem to be more effective with individuals or small groups then with larger groups. In this regard, collective narcissism can create even larger problems in implementation. For example, the intent of a "freely chosen course of action" is to produce "minimal internal defensiveness" (Argyris, 1970: 17-18). The OD change agent or learning system designer thus needs to construct a cognitive map of the client's central needs. This is a difficult task for a change agent or educator under any circumstances. However, when the client is a large collective narcissistic group or an egocentric Millennial individual, the "central needs" of the client can become diffused and difficult to target effectively.

This may make internal commitment to organizational change or individual learning difficult to attain. The two conditions necessary for the manifestation of internal commitment are the construction of the cognitive road map as previously discussed, and a challenge of change that is both realistic and aspirational. However, when dealing with narcissists, the question of aspiration can devolve to only those points of view that support an inflated and sensitive self-image. The constant drive to reinforce the narcissist's fragile self-image, in the case of a challenge of a successful change implementation, really boils down to a question of an "I" versus "We" orientation.

Internal commitment eventually has to come down to the question of "Commitment to what?" If the course of action serves both the "We" needs of the larger group or learning exercise and the "I" needs of the narcissist, then narcissistic individuals or narcissistic groups may "sign off" on such a program since the "We" in this case also includes the "I". This is the Argyris model at full flowering, working as it was intended to function. However, if the narcissist perceives that the course of action does not adequately serve the "I", then derailment of the agenda may follow. This could, of course, explain any failure at systemic change or individual learning. However, narcissists are hyper-sensitive to such matters, since external feedback and systemic support are needed to bolster and preserve their enhanced self-image and feelings of self-importance. Seeing their grandiose schemes or inflated self-image potentially at risk, and fueled by extraordinary levels of self-entitlement and/or arrogance, narcissists can become a source of resistance to organizational change and individual learning, and a difficult challenge when it comes to attaining meaningful levels of lasting internal commitment.

Blumenfeld, Kempler, and Krajcik (2006: 476) conclude that learner engagement has iterative properties, and that "mastering a … skill can lead to greater feelings of competence and greater perceived value of the endeavor, and result in higher (subsequent) levels of engagement." This is true, however, only if the processes of the engagement generate valid information, and are coming from the perspective of personally responsible adult learning. A belief in self-efficacy is healthy only if that self-efficacy belief is encapsulated in an envelope of reality-based information.

POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS

While some millennial characteristics constrain motivation and learning, many classic concepts from the management literature can be applied to provide potential options for educators and practitioners who strive to facilitate student and employee motivation.

For example, the Skinnerian approach (Skinner, 1938) to learning offers two viable reinforcement schemes, the presentation or removal of positive stimuli – positive reinforcement and extinction, respectively. Reinforcement schemes involving negative stimuli would not be recommended for Millennials since those stimuli should, to the extent possible, be minimized in their environment generally. Vroom's expectancy theory (1964) argues that motivation is sensitive to an individual's expectation that effort will lead to performance that in turn serves as an instrument to valued outcomes. The theory seems robust to Millennials; educators and employers may simply need to scrutinize and remove possible barriers to expectancy, instrumentality, and valence more proactively than ever.

Jobs and coursework that are intrinsically motivating (Deci & Ryan, 1985) to Millennials preempt many of the concerns raised earlier, so greater effort in recruiting and selection to ensure person-job fit and in career and academic counseling to help millennials identify coursework, pedagogies, and work most well-suited to their needs and wishes should pay dividends. Realistic job previews and assessment centers are also valuable tools for employers to this end. Job design, as embodied by the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) should also be applied rigorously where possible. Expansive and quick feedback, carefully and positively framed, seems especially crucial in the digital age, in both the classroom and workplace. Supportive communication and active listening that validate the student/employee should also help navigate the complex terrain of the Millennial ego. Framing information in a positive way that also encourages improvement may require some communication gymnastics, but seems essential to tap into Argyris' (1970) intervention method.

The above recommendations, drawn from fundamental management concepts taught at the survey level, will surely not solve all motivational and learning issues relating to Millennials but certainly seem preferable to throwing up our hands in defeat. By simply practicing what we preach, we can begin the arduous but hopefully rewarding process of moving the motivational mountain to Mohammed.

CONCLUSION

ABSEL members cannot deny that Millennials occupy our classrooms and are the target users of our experiential learning exercises and simulations. However, they may be tough targets for learning if high levels of ego and narcissism exist in the classroom environment. Moreover, Millennials also demonstrate propensities towards complexity avoidance, emphasizing simplicity in data/information processing at the expense of pursuits directed towards examining issues of systemic complexity. These challenges have been examined in this paper through the lens the Argyris (1970) intervention model.

To the extent that these phenomena exist, they present a challenge for ABSEL practitioners. Our experiential learning and simulation techniques are, almost by definition, more participatory. In addition, many of our exercises and techniques are based on assumptions of adult levels of learning and active engagement in the learning process. We could see such techniques flounder in a Millennial user population that simultaneously demands such an approach, but may have trouble processing it as mature and personally responsible learners.

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