

Don't Teach Me, Let Me Learn!

Millennial Learning

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Abstract

This research paper attempts to link the millennial behavior and attitudes with the appropriate learning styles based on adult learning theories. Insights into the preferences and behaviors of this cohort will enable learning and development professionals to craft the learning style inventory effective for millennials. This understanding will help curate better content and harness the potential of the millennials in the workforce.

1. Introduction

With millennials likely to constitute nearly 50 percent of the workforce by 2020¹, a greater understanding of millennial behaviors has emerged as an area of interest. Older generations will have to interact with the millennial social group as they enter workforces and educational institutions (Rodriguez & Rodriguez, 2015). HR practitioners and organizations have to evaluate and implement new strategies to motivate, engage and inspire their millennial population.

Research has focused on the behaviors commonly demonstrated by the millennials (Eddy, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). However learning mechanisms most relevant to the millennials has not been extensively researched. Developing this insight is critical for learning and development professionals and instructional designers. This will help practitioners in creating effective training modules and programs. This will enable millennials to be successful at the workplace.

2. Millennials in the Workforce

Generations exposed to and experiencing similar social, technological and historical events, tend to demonstrate commonalities of behaviors and ideologies (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). With the increasing population of the millennials in the

workforce (Farell & Hurt, 2014), there has been increased interest in the behaviors which typify this cohort of new workers. Concerns emerge with some research citing dysfunctional behaviors of the millennials such as self-centeredness associated with the "Look at Me" generation (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). The millennials are also reported to be disrespectful, disloyal and lacking in work ethic (Monaco & Martin, 2007; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010)

The Millennials or Gen Y are the demographic cohort following Generation X. The "no future" Generation X has given way to the "has no clue where we are going" Generation Y (Miller, Shapiro, & Hilding Hamann, 2008). Howe & Strauss (1991) are often credited with coining the word "Millennials". However, there is considerable confusion on the exact year span which encompass the millennial generation. While Howe & Strauss (1991) defined the millennial cohort as consisting of individuals born between 1982 and 2004, the ranges of 1982-2000 (Mc Crindle, 2015), 1980 - 1995 (Eddy, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010) and 1980-2000 (Farell & Hurt, 2014) etc. have also been found to apply to the millennials. A global generational study conducted by Price water house Coopers with the University of Southern California and the London Business School defined Millennials as those born in the period 1980- 1995(PWC, 2013). The differences in outlook between the various generations is given in Table 1 and demonstrates the challenges of working effectively in a multi-generation environment.

The environment that the millennials have grown up in and are commonly exposed to is far different from those experienced by the earlier generations. The amount of information the millennials get from the internet, mainly social networks, makes them feel that they must be heard when they speak (Bauerlein, 2011). In the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and

¹ <https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/services/consulting/documents/millennials-at-work.pdf> last accessed on 27th May 2016

Table 1 : Generation classification and typical behaviors associated with the generation

Generation	Period	Current Age (youngest)	Other Names	Typical Characteristics/ Behavioral Patterns
Traditionalists	1945 & before	70+	Veterans, Silent, Radio Boomers, The Forgotten Generation	Conformers, dedication, sacrifice, duty before pleasure, discipline, patience, loyalty
Baby Boomers	1946 to 1964	52+	Moral Authority, "Me" Generation	Anti-government, equal opportunities & rights, personal gratification,
Gen X	1965 to 1981	35+	The Doers, Post Boomers	Balance, diversity, entrepreneurial, fun, highly educated
Millennials	1982 to 2000	16+	Gen Y, Gen Next, Echo Boomers	Self-confident, sociability, diversity, extreme fun, extremely techno savvy, extremely spiritual, now!
Centennials	2001 onwards	<16	iGen, Gen Z, Gen Zee	Vigilant outlook, tempered expectations, less self absorbed, more self assured

Ambiguous) world, the use of technology is essential and appears to be the key to ensuring knowledge transfer (Rodriguez & Rodriguez, 2015). The impact of media has been massive in shaping how the millennials have grown and adapted to their world. Millennials have better understanding of media and digital technology and are considered to be tech savvy (Cleyle, Partridge, & Hallam, 2006; Connor, Shaw, & Fairhurst, 2008; Feiertag & Berge, 2008; Glass, 2007; Skiba & Barton, 2006; Sweeney, 2012; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010).

Millennials demonstrate higher levels of self-confidence (Bohl, 2009 ; Connor, Shaw, & Fairhurst, 2008; Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Monaco & Martin, 2007 ; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Millennials are often termed as multitaskers as they perform tasks simultaneously and believe their performance excels in this manner (Bohl, 2009; Feiertag & Berge, 2008). Their way of processing new knowledge tends to be more practical and "hands on" (Bauerlein, 2011; Monaco & Martin, 2007; Skiba & Barton, 2006; Wesner & Miller, 2008).

Rewards for participating in activities, rather than the rewards for achievement is an expectation of the millennials (Tolbize, 2008; Meister & Willyerd, 2010). Immediate gratification is an expectation, like a birthright. They show interest in the allocation of tasks to complete as a team but the level of commitment among members is very shallow (Twenge, 2013). With

a low tolerance for delays, millennials expect quick information, feedback, results, team achievements, personal promotions, and fostering interpersonal relationships in the fastest way possible (Bohl, 2009; Feiertag & Berge, 2008; Monaco & Martin, 2007; Immerwahr, 2009; Skiba & Barton, 2006). Therefore instant gratification permeates practically every aspect of their lives and interactions. Skipping processes, lack of consensus in group decisions, absence of conventional courtesies, and skirting on ethical issues are tolerated behaviors (Cleyle, Partridge, & Hallam, 2006; Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004; Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Sweeney, 2012; Wilson & Gerber, 2008).

Millennials' capacity to assimilate and manage knowledge does not appear different from other generations. However, the propensity and regularity to read emails and short bits of text on web pages is much more than books (Twenge, 2013).

Millennials are also seen to be autonomous and have less respect for hierarchical structures in workplaces, particularly if actions are not well structured or supported by a safety net (Howe & Strauss, 1991). While Millennials prefer working hard, they demonstrate a willingness to sacrifice high incomes for leisure time or health. They demonstrate an affinity for a good work life balance. With diversity being part of the natural environment of millennials, acceptance of diversity is demonstrated in their preference for

teamwork (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), but the expectation is for the team environment to provide speed, convenience, flexibility and power (Connor, Shaw, & Fairhurst, 2008; Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004 ; Skiba & Barton, 2006; Sweeney, 2012; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010).

3. Adult Learning Theory - Androgogy

Theories supporting adult learning argue that the process of learning is essentially social in nature (Dachner & Polin, 2016). For instance, Kolb (1984) argued for experiential learning based on the constructivist perspective. The experiential learning theory is built on the propositions that learning is a process of creating knowledge; all learning involving re-learning; learning requires resolution of conflicts and differences; and learning is a holistic process of adaptation and resulting from a synergistic transaction between learner and environment (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Effectiveness of learning depends on quality of content and delivery mechanisms. For this purpose, Blooms' taxonomy is mainly used to help instructors in evaluating course materials, objectives and assess student performance (Halawi, McCarthy, & Pires, 2009). This taxonomical approach groups the behaviors into cognitive, affective and psychomotor categories of learning. Blooms taxonomy helps facilitators assess learning outcomes on the basis of creating, evaluating, analyzing, applying, understanding and remembering the concepts.

Knowles (1913 - 1997) defined andragogy as the art and science of adult learning. The five assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners (andragogy) that are different from the assumptions about child learners (pedagogy) are:

Self-Concept: As an individual matures his/her self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being

- a. Adult Learner Experience: As an individual matures, the growing reservoir of experiences becomes an increasing resource for learning.
- b. Readiness to Learn: As an individual matures his/her readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his/her social roles.

- c. Orientation to Learning: As an individual matures his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his/her orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centeredness.
- d. Motivation to Learn: As an individual matures the motivation to learn is more internal



Knowles' espoused principles of Andragogy are: Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction; adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life and Adult learning is problem centered rather than content oriented.

So while Blooms' approach is more focused on creating pedagogy and Kolb's approach is based on the experiential learning process, we find the Knowles approach to be an integration of both these theories and more relevant for adult learning.

4. Knowles Learning Principles and Millennial Learning Style

People in the workplace have many opinions about millennials' development preferences and behaviors, but most of these lack supporting data. Due to the lack of substantial information, organizations struggle to identify how they can customize development to appeal to the millennial population.

It is interesting to understand that millennials highly value development opportunities at work. Sixty five percent of millennials stated that the opportunity for

personal development was the most influential factor in choosing their current job (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2011). Millennials are 34% more likely to rank learning and development as one of the top five important employer value proposition attributes. While it is known that non-technology-based learning approaches may also appeal to the millennials, characteristics of multi-tasking, need to understand what's-next, and attention and feedback seeking behavior morph the learning preferences for them. Those of the millennial generation who are described as digital natives, individuals who have never known a world without computers, often fail to separate technology from what that technology enables us to do (Farell & Hurt, 2014). This influence must be considered heavily when determining ideal learning mechanisms of millennials. Increasingly leveraging technology as a learning platform is becoming popular for a wider, quicker and easier dissemination of knowledge (Brown & Charlier, 2013). Use of interactive technological elements in learning activities surely appeals to the millennial generation's active learning style and also aligns with millennials being tech savvy. Therefore technology based learning, such as online and mobile learning platforms as the mode of knowledge transfer, making use of simulations, games, quizzes, MOOCs, web based interactions, videos or even research repositories, which will be available at anytime and anywhere would be preferred. These technology based learning methods also fosters team orientation and collaboration for group exercises which connects people across the globe to take up assignments cross borders and complete them virtually.

Considering the behaviors and attributes of the millennial generation, we believe that the learning methodologies adopted by practitioners would need to be adapted to better suit the millennial generation. Integrating Knowles andragogy with the millennial behavior, we propose a learning model as shown in Figure 2 that would increase the effectiveness of trainings and knowledge acquisition for the millennials. (Fig. 2)

While the various millennial traits and characteristics may amplify differently based on the context, we may also see one-to-many mapping of Knowles andragogy principles to the millennial traits. Nevertheless the ones that primarily relate to a Knowles concept and

strongly integrate to a demonstrated behavior have been mapped in our argument. We have also chosen to map the characteristics in the sequence in which learning happens. The learning sequence typically starts with getting introduced to a new concept, understanding, applying, reflecting and then re-applying the learning, which is in sync with various steps of the adult learning theories.

Knowles introduced the concept of self-directed learning which is based on the principle that people who take the initiative in learning will learn more, be motivated to learn, retain and make use of the learning (Knowles, 1975). The theory behind self-directed learning comes from the word andragogy (Knowles, 1975). Andragogy is the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998).

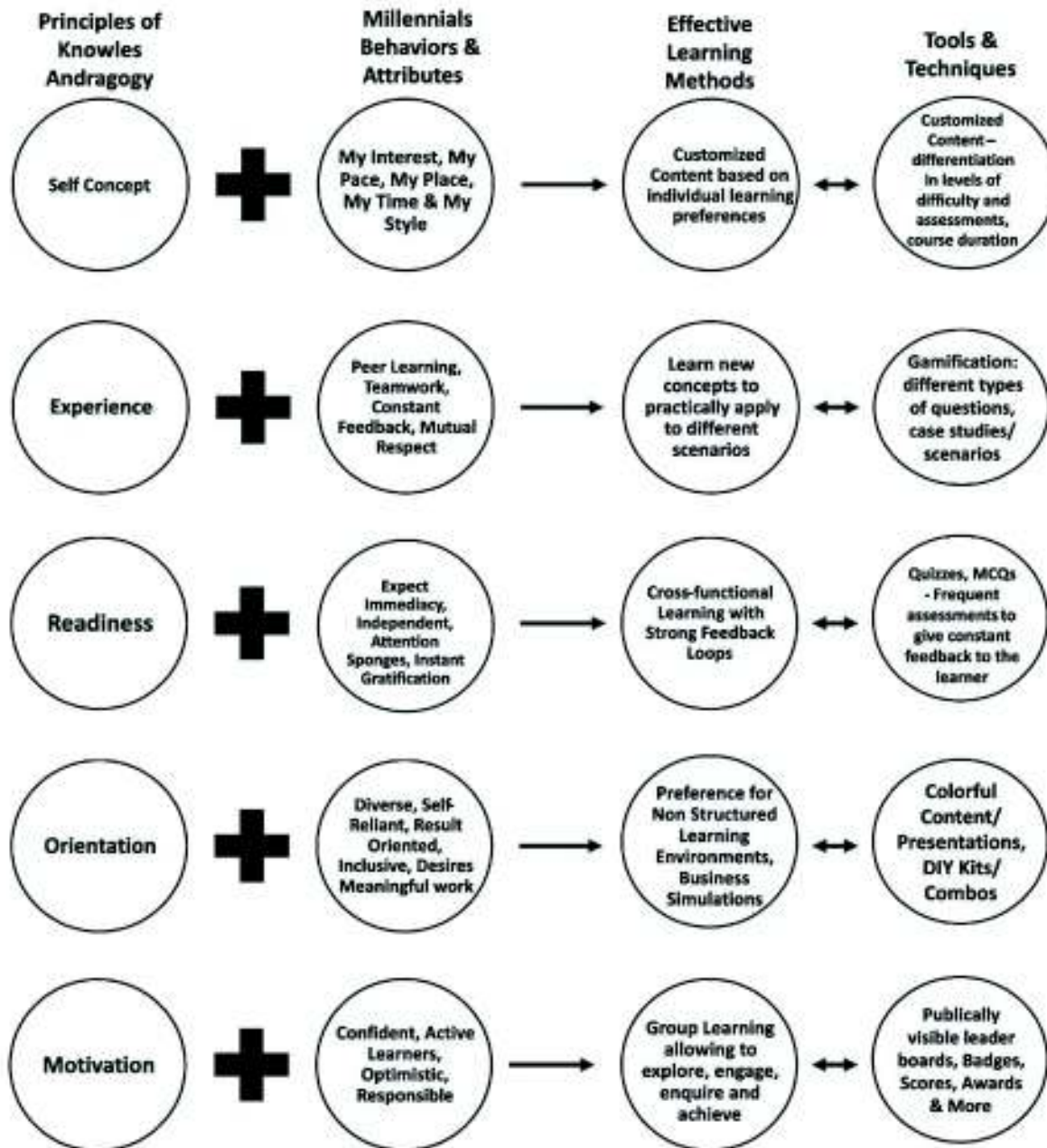
As a result of Knowles' work, there are two models of learning: the pedagogical model and the andragogical model. Initially, Knowles (1975) established five sets of learner assumptions: (i) Concept or self-concept of the learner, (ii) role of learner's experience, (iii) readiness to learn, (iv) orientation to learning and (v) motivation to learn. The five adult learning assumptions are:

The learners' Concept or self-concept: In the andragogical model, this implies that learners want to be responsible for their own learning by being self-directed. As established in research, millennials do not like the feeling of "being taught" and would make an effort to learn when they become aware that a situation warrants/requires learning. Effective learning methods need to provide an environment of self-directed learning, otherwise they meet resistance by the adult learner. The ability to let millennials choose both their learning curriculum, as well as the depth of detail would find greater acceptance by this cohort. Emphasizing on individualization of teaching and learning will therefore ensure complete control of what learners want for themselves (Brown & Charlier, 2013).

1. The learners' experience: As per Knowles learning, adults learn from their peers and the multitude of experiences in their lives. These experiences help in building a strong set of beliefs, values, and perspectives. Millennials prefer environments which are more inclusive, respectful of team contribution and provide strong peer to peer learning. The learning

Figure 2 : Millennial Learning Model

MILLENNIAL LEARNING MODEL



methodology which best replicates this ecosystem are gamified platforms, case study learning etc., which involve high levels of peer involvement. Millennial learners respond well to teaching and learning strategies aligned on these dimensions.

2. **Readiness to learn:** Knowles suggests that the adults' readiness to learn is motivated by a need to grow, with a clear linkage to "what's-in-it-for-me". Adults would prefer to learn where the application of the learning is visible in the very near future. This marries with the "instant gratification" need of the millennials. Displaying learning outcomes through quiz scores, providing opportunities to the millennials to establish their learning outcomes quickly. Hence instant gratification has to be an element considered while designing learning experiences of millennials.
3. **Orientation to learning:** Adults are situational learners and learning shifts from the subject-centredness (theory) to problem-centredness (practical). They will learn more effectively if the new knowledge is applicable to a real-life situation (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998). Millennials also demonstrate the need for deriving meaningful work and getting solutions and results.

Learning facilitators will therefore need to link experiential learning tools and practical situations like case studies, simulations, role plays into the andragogy for millennials.

4. **Motivation:** Adult learners are driven by intrinsic motivations such as enhanced satisfaction, better quality of life, etc. as also by external motivators like promotions, social recognition etc. Millennials, who have been described as the "Look at me generation" (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010), especially respond well to recognition. Hence methodologies which display high achievement through leader boards, gamification tool are well accepted by this cohort.

5. Tools for Effective Learning for the Millennials

5.1 E-Learning

Compared to the previous generations, millennials are more adept to the visual way of learning and learning through technology. Their ability to create content is matched by their potential to consume the same. Multimedia platforms and social learning platforms

such as Coursera, Udemy, EdX etc. offer a variety of content and allow the consumers to run, evaluate and comment on the content, therefore making the entire experience more collaborative by nature. Accessing content through mobile devices as well as laptops / desktops is increasingly acceptable form of learning. This also meets the "my time" requirement of the millennials. However, individual motivation and work load also determines the time spent on e-learning platforms. (Brown K. G., 2005). E-Learning is therefore emerging as a more efficient and effective platform for disseminating knowledge.

5.2 Gamification

With content pushed in smaller bites, followed by quick assessments, competitive leaderboards calling out peer performance and instant e-recognition makes learning a more social or collaborative exercise. The guerilla tactics is driving key learning outcomes through games helps align with the organization needs (Blunt, 2007) (Erenli, 2016)

Few popular ways of gamifying learning are

- **Gamified Assessments:** Conventional assessments are changed into short learning activities that take less than two to three minutes to complete.
- **Providing Choices:** Allowing a wide variety of choices like difficulty level of challenge (beginner, intermediate, advanced), types of questions based on their interest.
- **Performance/Participation based Badges for motivation:** Create badges for crossing a specific level of participation in the learning module and also based on performance.
- **Encourage collaboration:** Encouraging learners to work together on questions, a common practice of gamers who team up in order to achieve an epic score.
- **Leaderboards for status update and feedback:** Essentially gives a quick overview of performance of all the learners on the platform. It also gives the individual performance dashboard for greater understanding of the way one has to improvise.
- **Reward mastery:** Get extra bonus points for excellent performance

5.3 Simulation based learning

With higher acceptance of peer-to-peer learning, scenario based learning methodologies are widely being used for millennial learning for a blended approach (Brown & Charlier, 2013). Case based learning is a popular tool, which emphasizes real life situations and allows for healthy debate and active learning. Equally, business simulations and experiential/outbound learning interventions focus on real time behaviors, reactions, scenarios which foster holistic development.

Conclusion

The success of the millennials in the workforce is contingent on understanding what makes them tick. Our paper highlights how learning mechanisms also need to change to adapt to the millennials preferences and styles. Based on Knowles andragogy, we proposed a learning model for millennials which allows millennials to control what they learn, when, where and how they learn. The needs like instant gratification, success and recognition at workplace are met by tools like gamification, public leaderboard, social learning and quick feedback mechanisms.

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