HELPING MILLENNIAL STUDENTS LEARN WITH GUSTO WHAT THEY THINK THEY HATE

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Abstract

The paper explores the process of content exploration and discovery as well as student self-discovery that a course in economic history afforded once the teaching methodology encouraged student learning by discovery, exploration, collaboration, and use of technology. The anatomy of the two superpowers of the 19th and the 20th century, respectively, came alive with student engagement and personalized projects, as the students- turned-researchers became actively involved in the course content creation and were able to develop puzzles and problem-solving activities for their peers. Apart from the ensuing student engagement and their newly found gusto in handling economic history issues, although originally perceived as holding little excitement and intellectual promise to the students, the approach was also found to generate increased knowledge retention, as demonstrated by the end-of-course exam.

Keywords: economic history, student engagement, enhanced learning, students as creators of knowledge, active learning

1. The Context

The paper and the research underlying it was born from the challenges and frustrations I experienced for the past three years when teaching a British and American Culture Course to third year students in the Applied Modern Languages undergraduate program that the School of International Business and Economics has been offering. This is a uniquely innovative undergraduate program in Romania in terms of its vision, mission, and curriculum. The program is to be assessed for accreditation purposes in the near future, so as to move on from authorization status to accreditation.

As a linguistic note, this paper will be constantly referring to British economic development, British pre-eminence, and British industrial revolution, etc., with British used in the current acceptation of the word, that is denoting anything related to the UK, as illustrated, for example, by the Collins Cobuild Dictionary

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in its online version: "**British** means belonging or relating to the United Kingdom, or to its people or culture."

The British and American Culture Course is an elective course offered in the first semester of the third year and it carries three credit units. The course consists of seven interactive lectures and 14 seminars. The assessment is conducted throughout the sessions as on-going assessment and, at the end of the semester, as summative assessment in the form of a comprehensive written test. Given the limited scope of the course and the overall vision of the program, the course focuses on the UK as the first world superpower in the 19th century and the USA as the leading power in the 20th century world, in an attempt to help the students scrutinize the anatomy of their economic success. A second objective is to raise the students' awareness of the milestones and the critical incidents that account for their economic development and the leading roles the two nations played over the past two centuries. The ultimate goal was to distill the economic realities in the two countries under analysis so as to unravel the blueprint of their success as well as the cultural values that underlie it. And as present realities commonly have their roots in past developments, our course built necessarily on historic events that impacted the growth of the British and the American economy.

By way of example, the Industrial Revolution in Britain focused our attention on account of its essential role in triggering mass-production and mass-consumption, thereby setting modern consumption patterns and building British economic pre-eminence throughout the world in the 19the century. The haunting question – why did the Industrial Revolution take place first in Britain, of all countries? – invites a second question that lies at the very foundation of any discussion of the Industrial Revolution, namely: how come that Britain was more eager than any other county in Europe to find ways to replace human labor by machinery?

Unless we take a diachronic perspective and point out what made Britain unique in terms of machinery development and why Britain had the right environment for encouraging and attracting innovative projects that set in the age of machinery and increased productivity, the Industrial Revolution appears as a miracle that privileged, by chance, Britain. Therefore, in order to help the students discover the causal relationships at work, our course pointed out the ravaging effects of the Black Death that swept over Europe, Britain included, in the 14th century, killing as much as almost 50% of the entire population of Europe (Acemoglu, Robinson, 2012: 96-101).

The point I was making in the course was that given Britain's insularity, the dwindling population in the UK starting in the latter half of the 14th century soon impacted the economy. With high demand and low supply in the wake of the plague, the reduced British workforce was able to request higher pay and negotiate better labour terms and contracts. That is the reason labour was significantly more expensive in Britain and British workers' salaries were higher that the salaries paid in other parts of Europe (Allen, 2006: 2-6).I was thus encouraging the students to discover the complex reasons behind the range of technical innovations that were the hallmark of the Industrial revolution in Britain and that paved the way to the modern times and the consumption society.

The approach is very much in line with modern historiography when highlighting the unique economic environment in Britain and its impact on the rise of the Industrial Revolution and of the modern world, as apparent from the quintessential quotes below :"Together, these differentials explain why British entrepreneurs were so much motivated to pursue technological innovation than their continental counterparts. It made better sense in Britain than anywhere else to replace expensive men with machines fuelled by cheap coal." (Ferguson, 2012: 204)."The reason that the British inventions of the 18th century – cheap iron and the steam engine, in particular – were so transformative was because of the possibilities

they created for the further development of technology. …In other words, there was only one route to the 20th century – and it went through northern Britain." (Allen, 2006: 30)

As a result, history was inevitable and inescapable in our course, to the students' displeasure as I was soon to find out. I included it in small, palatable amounts, but it was still history. To my surprise, the first introductory course in which I outlined the course content and pointed out the teaching methodology that built around thematic surveys of key historic developments followed by the exploration of their economic impact, with multiple opportunities for the students to engage in research and presentations that they were goaded to initiate, drive, and lead, the course participants appeared to be restless and unhappy at the prospect of revisiting past events. They articulated their dislike of history and of remote events which, according to them, were irrelevant and of little value for their understanding of present-day realities.

In the face of their overwhelmingly negative experience of learning history in secondary education, we pursued the matter further to unravel the crux of the problem. They explained to me that they had been flooded with years and names of personalities in their history classes in high school, names and years which to them were meaningless in various degrees. According to the students' self-analysis, they were not patient enough or just not fully able to identify the causal relationships between facts in human history, so as to discover their inner logic and beauty. In brief, our course started lamely, with the students repeatedly professing their keen and deep-rooted dislike of history.

To make things worse, but in line with the research on the generation born in the very last years of the 20th century, the students appeared to be easily distracted and unengaged, just minimally engaged in class, or altogether bored. The challenges and frustrations I was experiencing seemed never to stop. I could sense the divide between the Millennials sitting in the lecture room and me, eager and enthusiastic to introduce them to Britain and the Black Death as the very origin of the limited labour supply and high salaries obtaining in the British economy at the end of the 14th century. Clearly, the comment made by one of the students -surveyed by Price - in relation to her Biology teacher was applicable to me as well:

"As one respondent lamented about her biology professor, '…he doesn't really talk about anything that we are interested in… he only talks about strictly class stuff and he won't go off onto anything else… he doesn't seem like he is into anything but scientific things.' " (Price, 2010:31)

I experienced pain – and I assume they did, too – as my beautifully designed, eye-opening course appeared to fall on dead ears, and to actually fall flat in all respects. The varied content that I had developed in order to surprise and engage them appeared to lead nowhere and what I expected to be an intellectual feast for the Millennial learners' minds was growing into just another course that they sat through and endured. No joy, no excitement, no passion at their end. This was the dominant note and prevailing mood until I began to research Generation Y, the Millennials' characteristic attributes and the way these attributes impact their learning style, in an effort to understand their needs and preferences, thereby finding the best approach to generate learning.

2. *Millennials as Learners: Generational Characteristics*

"Whether we like it or not, the Millennial learner is the new generation of students that we must influence, inspire, and serve." (Price, 2010: 30) With Millennials currently filling all the levels of the educational programs available in higher education, from undergraduate to post-doctoral, an exploration of their generational characteristics becomes imperative.

With all the tremendous diversity of this largest pool of students in history, they appear to share in common - just like any other generation - the values, attitudes, and beliefs that they have developed as a result of the experiences they have been part of. Therefore they have a unique profile that the teachers

need to be aware of and capitalize upon. As research demonstrates, "such generational influences establish different motivation levels, work ethics, and worldviews that impact teaching and learning. Understanding generational differences, therefore, may enhance one's impact and effectiveness in the classroom." (Pastorino, 2007:16)

Before any further comments, we need to clarify the identity and the many names under which this generation is known in the Anglo-Saxon space." They're referred to as Generation Y, Nexters, Baby Boom Echo Generation, Echo Boomers, Digital Natives, Generation Next, Generation Me and, of course, Millennials."(Bart, 2011:1)

The Millennials as students have been closely researched. Since they are the first generation born into technology who grew up with the Internet,they are truly always connected to data and to other students. As a result, all knowledge is just a click, or several, away. Since "all knowledge is accessible" (McGee, 2007: 48) and all information is on demand (*idem:* 27) they are able, right away, to find and filter the information they need. This has major repercussions on the teacher's role as s/he is no longer required to act as disseminator of knowledge but rather as a guide, facilitator, and coach who is expected to focus the students'endeavours so as to enhance their learning experience.

With knowledge at their finger tips, the Millennial students can provide the content themselves and they can organize it so as to meet their needs, that is they can easily personalize it, according to extensive research conducted on the U.S. student population. Personalization goes a long way with the Millennials and impacts their learning strategies as well, as pointed out by Novotney who focuses on the Millennials as students of psychology: "millennials also want assignments that are more creative than the typical 10-page final paper, say psychologists.'Millennials seem to be more experiential and exploratory learners, so they really seem to benefit from the personalization and customization of assignments" (Novotney, 2010: 60),according to a psychology professor who illustrates her statement as follows: "Her students develop podcasts or PowerPoint presentations with audio narratives to demonstrate their knowledge of a psychological concept." (*idem*)

What Price describes as the "Millennials' team orientation, interdependence, and desire for connection" (Price, 2010: 31) has major consequences on the classroom where they expect to learn by being taught creatively and simultaneously entertained in the process. With them, learning is effective when it is necessarily joyful. Or as Price states it so memorably when describing the Millennials' opinions on the learning environment they prefer: learning needs to be "'relaxed', 'enjoyable', and that awful 'F' word we dread hearing…'fun'." (*Idem*: 33)

Not only that the Millennials choose to shift the focus of their education from effective to enjoyable and that they expect their learning experiences to be filled with fun and excitement, but they also expect constant participation and engagement, with multi-tasking as their *modus operandi*. As such, they require a complementarity of teaching methods that can bring the teaching content alive and engage their attention fully. Unless traditional teaching methods like lectures are enhanced by other pedagogical approaches which engage them and invite their reactions, such as group discussions, short video input available on You Tube, group-based projects, and the like, they clearly do the Millennials a dis-service, in that they fail to focus their attention and generate learning.

"Millennials have grown up in an era in which they were constantly engaged. When they are not interested, their attention quickly shifts elsewhere. This research suggests Millennials prefer a variety of active learning methods, as opposed to a more traditional lecture-only format."(Price, 2010: 33)

To further compound the pedagogical challenges this generation raises to teachers, the Millennials are accustomed to the instant gratification of their learning needs which the Internet makes unfailingly available. As a result, their learning is likely to occur in informal, warm, empathetic environments, via technology, or their learning will be at least generously spiced by technology. In addition, this learning will definitely happen at untraditional times in the day. To sum it up, Millennials appear to learn best in a personalized learning context, by relying on technology, at all times, and not necessarily in the classroom.

Until the educational institutions are reformed in line with the requirements of this first generation born with technology, it is the teachers - who most commonly are Baby Boomers and Generation X - who need to reform their own pedagogical approach as they walk into the classrooms and need to engage this diverse, challenging and yet exciting generation of students.

Before we look into some real-life classroom strategies that the teachers may like to come up with for the Millennials, we will take a final, fond look at them, a look intended to inspire and inform the pedagogical solutions. The quote below portrays the Millennials in the USA, that is why some references that were deemed of a distinctly local nature have been removed so as to render this portrait of Millennials highly relevant to international readersas well.

"Millennials comprise the majority of today's college students. Their values, attitudes, and beliefs have been shaped most dramatically by technology, which gives them instant access to pop culture and the material world. Their childhoods included such events as Columbine, day care, the Oklahoma City bombings, and, most recently, the terrorist attacks on September 11th. They grew up with Chelsea Clinton, TinkyWinky, Ricky Martin, Barney, Britney Spears, the Backstreet Boys, <....> and Saddam Hussein. They listen to hip-hop, rap, R & B, and rock on their mp3 players; have readily available illegal drugs; and can travel to any location via the Internet. They have cell phones, computers, virtual malls, and Instant Messaging. Such conditions have fostered a generation that is realistic, capable of multitasking, flexible, and appreciative of diversity. They want tasks to be fun and prefer to "collaborate" rather than command." (Pastorino, 2007:18)

3. Engaging the Millennials: A Romanian Pedagogical Solution

As the research surveyed in the previous section appeared to confirm my own observations and intuition, I re-designed the course and the seminar by including extensive opportunities for learner engagement in which the students could build on their interests and creativity.

In practical terms, the overall design of our academic interactions was adapted, so as to make room for significantly more student responsibility for their own learning. Student -led activities clearly managed to engage their interest and to give them the opportunity to research, discover and connect both information items available on the internet and also connect with fellow students in order to successfully complete their projects. In this way, " many of the components of their ideal learning environment – less lecture, use of multimedia, collaborating with peers" (Bart, 2011:1) were given pride of place. Positive results followed suit, in the form of a clear-cut change in student attitude and engagement level, as well as in the quality of the learning outcomes.

The students reported that the topics they were working on collaboratively had significantly more appeal and relevance to them when they had the opportunity to contribute to the course content, as opposed to having the content delivered by the teacher and simply receiving it. Student contributions took a range of forms: from providing the content themselves and organizing it, to collaborating with peers to share questions and opinions and combining data from multiple sources. This student contribution added a personalized dimension to the learning experience that never failed to energize the students and to focus their attention and skills. In line with McGee's findings, this approach offered students the opportunity to

connect "to data and to each other" (McGee, 2007:48), at the same time allowing and actually encouraging them to "find, filter, and focus" (*idem*) the information that their inter-connectivity yielded.

However, the student contribution soon required a reallocation of course time, with some 30% more time allocated to student talk. Welcome as this reallocation was in terms of student engagement and learning outcomes, it still signaled that we were to transition from extensive learning, with panoramic perspectives and massive information disseminated by the faculty member in charge of the course, to intensive learning, with in-depth forays into relevant aspects researched and presented by students. Judging by the overall end-of-term results, we actually made a productive decision along the line "less is more".
Another meaningful change that significantly impacted the students' commitment was inspired by Price and her findings on the Millennial students' relationship to information and their attitude to the learning that incorporates it. According to her, "Millennials do not typically value information for information's sake. One of the greatest challenges of the professoriate will be to connect course content to the current culture, and make learning outcomes and activities relevant to Millennial learners and their future." (Price, 2010:33)

Given our economic focus, the sheer comparison of pre-industrial living standards to the consumer society of today gave students ample opportunities to explore, be stunned, reflect, count their own blessings, and then creatively convey their sense of awe at the benefits of the Industrial Revolution upon humanity, the same Industrial Revolution that appeared originally so boring, irrelevant, remote, and all coal-dust to them.

A limited sample of Pre-Industrial Revolution topics that the students researched and shared with the class is available in what follows. Imagine eating day in, day out the same food, food that was produced within not more than 20 miles from one's humble home. Imagine not travelling anywhere all life long. Imagine living in a community that knew no time pieces. What could be the meaning of cottage industries in Pre-Industrial Britain?

In terms of Industrial Revolution topics, the few that follow may still provide a representative sample: Imagine living in London which by 1850 was the largest and most advanced city in the world, but still lacked a sewage system. Discover what created a need for free public education and what goals mass education was called to serve. Discover why children were so extensively employed in factories and coal mines. Imagine a work week with seven full days, 12-16 hours of work daily. What message does the statement "Britain as the workshop of the world" convey? Napoleon was a bitter foe of the UK and still he chose to buy British cloth for his army's uniforms. Why is that?

Such topics and the multiple perspectives they invited made the content area more meaningful to the students and tied the teaching content with culture and current developments and events, also creating a context for them to share real life experiences.

The moment we opened our interactions up to multimedia content, no matter how tiny the screen which displayed it - as occasionally students would proudly display the results of their team research and creative work on their own laptops when the rooms housing our seminars had no adequate equipment - the student excitement and responsiveness grew exponentially. And so did the learning that the course and seminar generated, again based strictly on the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the end-of-term assessment process.

The students clearly enjoyed the flexibility and the creativity the assignments allowed them. In addition, they could pick their assignment topics from a wide range or even design it themselves. Research repeatedly states that Millennial students enjoy active learning and therefore benefit from new teaching

approaches: "millennials also want assignments that are more creative than the typical 10-page final paper, say psychologists. 'Millennials seem to be more experiential and exploratory learners, so they really seem to benefit from the personalization and customization of assignments," Hartman says. Her students develop podcasts or PowerPoint presentations with audio narratives to demonstrate their knowledge of a psychological concept." (Novotney, 2010:60)

This pedagogical approach proved to have the potential to turn Millennial students into "active producers (as opposed to passive consumers) of knowledge" (Pinder-Grover, Groscurth, 2009: 5), helping them hone their critical thinking skills as they focus on course content , methods of inquiry and knowledge creation, as well as evaluating the knowledge created, therefore multiple benefits that impact and ultimately enhance the learning process.

The collaborative work that the assignments required, together with the personalized selection of topics - topics that the students picked if resonating with some of their needs and aspirations – and the diversity of media they could use to share the understanding they had acquired - from self-designed and produced video clips on YouTube to webpages and role-plays- account for the students' engagement and the newly discovered zest they contributed to the class."Millennials expect to be engaged in their learning, they do not do well being passive learners. If you (as a teacher/university) do not have technology that will be part of their learning, they will go somewhere else where they can be engaged with, and interactive with, technology." (Northern Illinois University)I believe my experience that is being documented in this paper fully confirms the validity of the above statement.

The approach that we employed in our pedagogical interactions built around topics of economic history was intended to help the third-year students taking the course to engage on a voyage of discovery and self-discovery by highlighting the circumstances and the decisions that have been instrumental to the development of the UK and the USA, in an effort to engage the Millennial students with the teaching content and enhance their learning in a field that they originally perceived as utterly unappealing to them. In the process, we were able to illuminate different angles and critical incidents in the complex processes under focus and made the learning more personalized and meaningful to the student, although significantly less extensive than originally planned.

By trading the initial over-ambitious comprehensive and panoramic teacher-centered approach for a kaleidoscopic one that shifted the focus of the teaching process towards students as active participants in the learning process in their capacity as creators or co-creators of knowledge, the re-calibrated course gave the Millennial students the opportunity to act as students responsible for their own learning. What actually happened was that they developed expertise on narrow sections of the topic under analysis and then, by virtue of their collaborative propensity, were able to intertwine their newly created knowledge and put the puzzle pieces together, in jigsaw fashion, in the tapestry of British and American economic history.

As the students repeatedly mentioned in the seminars, they found the process creative and, or rather, personally gratifying. My own observations of the class activity and what I noticed in the ongoing assessment and the summative assessment at the end of the semester clearly demonstrated that the lesser scope that the course had adopted, together with the student activation strategies and the ensuing shift in responsibility and increased contribution to the co-creation of the teaching content generated increased learning and a sense of excitement and discovery about the content and the dreaded economic history that they all had professed to hate as a result of its student-perceived irrelevance.

When analyzing in retrospect the outcomes of these Millennial-induced pedagogical decisions and their impact in our specific learning environment, I realize that at a much smaller, humbler scale our course approached the key economic developments in the UK and the USA leading to their world pre-eminence

in the 19th and, respectively, the 20th century very much in the way that "The Valley of the Shadow" or any other good game does. By games I mean self-selected activities that people pursue for a sense of joy and excitement and which, by virtue of the very joy and excitement embedded in them, do more for learning than many dry classroom experiences ever accomplish.

A clear description of the approach I have in mind is available in the extensive quote below: "…rather than telling students the conclusions of history, a University of Virginia interactive Web site, 'The Valley of the Shadow' (http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/), allows students to draw their own conclusions about the Civil War through original records taken from two similar counties in Virginia and Pennsylvania - similar except for the fact that one allowed slavery and the other was free. Utilizing census data, agricultural records, newspaper articles, church records, and letters from soldiers and their families, the site allows individuals to explore authentic information via multiple paths. Students report the experience to be highly engaging and more effective for learning than being told about history. In fact, according to Google, the site is the most heavily trafficked Civil War site on the Web, attracting students from other institutions as well as millions of informal learners." (Oblinger,2004: 13)

With all the apparent success of the approach in academic terms and Millennial perception, it still involves sensitive issues that need to be carefully considered and wise decisions to be made as concerns student use of technology for learning enhancement purposes. Once students become better engaged with the learning content through the use of technology, the teaching staff have solved a problem, but have raised many others that may have never been contemplated when student engagement and activation as co-creator of knowledge was the all time priority. The complexity of the issue requires institutional policies and comprehensive support for the teachers, so as to offer students the opportunity to learn by stretching their minds and exploring beyond their comfort zone, technology-wise included.

The following quote touches upon the many-tiered complexity of using technology in education in order to provide superior learning opportunities to the Millennial students and the generations following them. In doing this, the quote that closes the paper also highlights the new areas of teacher responsibility involved in this.

"Further, we argue from the evidence we have available that decision making around the use of technologies for teaching and learning should not be based solely on students' preferences and their current practices. Teachers have a clear role to play in selecting appropriate technologies for the teaching approach and subject area that they teach. They also have a role in developing a deeper level of skill than can be found spontaneously amongst students entering university. These skills might be in particular tools, such as spreadsheets, but they may encompass wider skills such as information and digital literacies. What's more, educators need to develop a deeper understanding of the educational affordances of these new technologies and how they could be used to facilitate a range of teaching and learning practices and improve the process and outcomes of students' learning. Achieving this requires an engagement with the educational rationale for the deployment of particular technologies, an active participation in experimentation with different tools and technologies, and evaluation of the effectiveness of the technological tools in practice."(Jones, Shao,2011: 43).

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