Effectively Serving The Needs Of Today's Business Student: The Product Life Cycle Approach To Class Organization

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ABSTRACT

We illustrate a class organization process utilizing the concept of the Product Life Cycle to meet the needs of today's millennial student. In the Introduction stage of a business course, professors need to build structure to encourage commitment. In the Growth stage, professors need to promote the structure through multiple, brief activities that can keep the attention of business students. In the Mature stage, professors need to use the structure to stabilize engagement levels and learning rates but be willing to make adjustments to prevent apathy in the course. Finally, in the Decline stage, professors need to dismantle the structure while allowing opportunities for utilizing materials for future business courses and addressing today's millennial students' need for achievement and sense of entitlement with the course grades. The value is that this paper illustrates an approach to aid professors in organizing business courses that can be utilized in a variety of courses to better serve millennial students.

Keywords: Millennial Students; Product Life Cycle; Business Education

INTRODUCTION

Students currently attending school are called the "Millennial Generation" (Bell, Connell, & McMinn, 2011; Matulich, Papp, & Haytko, 2008; Pelton & True, 2004; Weiss, 2003). There is consensus that today's millennial generation student is very different from the Generation X or Baby Boomer professor that may be trying to reach them and changes are needed in teaching to effectively serve these students' needs (Matulich, et al., 2008). Price (2009, p.7) states what many faculty may be feeling with this generation - "I began to notice unrealistically high expectations of success among my students combined with astonishingly low level of effort on their part." Given the size of this generational cohort - over 80 million people, which is larger than the Baby Boom generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000) - and the differences between it and the prior generations who are now teaching them, insight on how to best reach these students in the business classroom is vital.

There are seven descriptors of millennial learners that have been described in the literature as introduced by Howe and Strauss (2000) and described by others: 1) their parents have taught them that they are "special", 2) they have been "sheltered" by their helicopter parents, 3) they are "confident" that they can change the world and feel a sense of social responsibility, 4) they are socially and "team-oriented", 5) they are high "achievers" (not in the traditional sense, but in the idea that they expect meaningful experiences that allow them work/life balance), 6) they feel "pressured" to perform and mature, and 7) they are "conventional" in that they like to know what exactly to expect in any situation (DeBard, 2004; Matulich, et al., 2008). Additional descriptors of millennial students include apathetic, technically proficient, culturally diverse (only two out of three are Caucasian) single parent household (one out of four) and/or working mothers (three out of four), and pragmatic (Bell, et al., 2011; Broido, 2004; Haytko, 2006; Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Understanding these characteristics may help teachers maximize students' learning and appropriately prepare students for their future careers (Sojka & Fish, 2008). A better understanding of millennials' expectations and priorities can help create offerings and environments that are more likely to engage and retain this generation in the work environment (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010) as well as educational environment (Bell, et al., 2011; Moore, 2007; Pelton & True, 2004). It is critical for the business education literature to address how faculty can best serve the educational needs of this generation. We feel there are additional means to address millennial students to improve teacher effectiveness. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how a business class can be better organized to meet the needs of millennial students through utilizing the Product Life Cycle framework.

One of the most well known theories of marketing is that of the Product Life Cycle. The Product Life Cycle can be used to analyze a product category, a product form, a product, or a brand (Kotler and Keller 2012, p. 310). We propose that the Product Life Cycle can also be applied to an individual course over a term period and that applying this concept can be exceptionally helpful in effectively reaching the millennial student. In this paper, we illustrate an approach that educators can utilize to better organize their course to meet the needs of millennial students throughout the course term. We first describe the characteristics of Millennials and the educational implications of those characteristics. Then we discuss how the Product Life Cycle can be utilized for class organization and provide recommendations for educators to effectively reach Millennials throughout the course.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Millennials have an immense need for affiliation, as a result, they are great team participants with tighter peer bonds and greater needs to achieve and succeed (Borges, Manuel, Elam, & Jones, 2010). This importance placed on achievement makes these students continuously expect new challenges, as well as need more attention and feedback (Bell, et al., 2011). These high-achievers expect to gain significant experiences that guarantee them future jobs (Matulich, et al., 2008). Just having a well paying job though is not enough as they aim to have a work-life balance (Bell, et al., 2011; Ng, et al., 2010). They want career advancement and to be able to dedicate time to their families, as well as to contribute to the society by helping others as they consider contributing to society a top career goal (Bell, et al., 2011).

Technological expertise is another frequently highlighted characteristic of Millennials (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; McAlister, 2009; McMahon & Pospisil, 2005; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Price, 2009). Their continuous exposure to all kinds of technology, learning by trial and error to absorb the latest technology, has Millennial students accustomed to trying different paths to obtain success (McAlister, 2009). Their high achievement orientation and technological expertise help Millennials to do everything faster and better than previous generations (Bell, et al., 2011).

Millennials are used to juggling several tasks at once, multitasking, which not only allows them to have an efficient and practical use of time, but also makes them more impatient (Sweeney, 2006). Some believe that multitasking can accelerate the student's learning (Sweeney, 2006), while others suggest that it can slow it as they might not retain the information needed (McAlister, 2009). Millennials are confident about the future and work well under pressure (McAlister, 2009). They acknowledge the importance of their personal choices and actions, trust and respect authority and accept diversity (Howe & Strauss, 2003).

Millennials are also very pragmatic with short attention spans and a high need for structure with low tolerance for ambiguity (Bell, et al., 2011). Due to their helicopter parents, they have grown up feeling entitled and thus have come to expect special individualistic-customized learning experiences that are self-paced. If Millennials do not see the benefit of learning the material, they can be apathetic (Haytko, 2006; Kothari, Rana, & Khade, 1993). A summary of Millennials' characteristics and the teaching implications is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of Millennial Students and Educational Implications

Key Characteristics	Educational Implications	Source
Achievement oriented	· Professional development · Want creative challenges · Goal oriented drive · Constant feedback · Relate to career and advancement · Results oriented Expect a meaningful Experience Skill building with application	(Bell, Connell, & McMinn, 2011; Borges, Manuel, Elam, & Jones, 2010; Howe & Strauss, 2003; Matulich, Papp, & Haytko, 2008; McAlister, 2009; Moore, 2007; Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010; Sweeney, 2006; Wilson, 2004)
Work/Life balance	· Personal fulfillment · Prefer having fun in the classroom than learning the subject matter	(Ferrell & Gonzalez, 2004; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Ng, et al., 2010; Sweeney, 2006)
Social responsibility-Community focused	· Accept authority · Visible protest and organizing · Service learning activities · Motivated to have an impact in others · Expect opinions heard and respected	(Bell, et al., 2011; Borges, et al., 2010; Broido, 2004; DeBard, 2004; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Wilson, 2004)
Team-Group oriented	· Allow work in groups · Active learning strategies · Maintain reciprocity and cooperation among students · Encourage contact between students and faculty · Interaction, demonstration, and social networking · Need time to reflect	(Bergman, Fearrington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011; Borges, et al., 2010; Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007; Hammer et al., 2010; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Howe & Strauss, 2003; McAlister, 2009; McGlynn, 2008; Moore, 2007; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Price, 2009; Sweeney, 2006; Wilson, 2004)
Multicultural - Global	· Great diversity, talents and interests	(Moore, 2007; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010)
Pragmatic – Relevant	· Short attention spans · Experiential and exploratory learners · Real world projects · Look for heroes that are a real inspiration · Very skeptical · Must know what to expect always	(Bell, et al., 2011; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Matulich, et al., 2008; Sweeney, 2006; Wilson, 2005)
Tech proficient	· Information processing differences · Visual and kinesthetic learners · Incorporate technology and usage rules · Online essays and readings on topic · Emails to project group members · Asynchronous discussion board postings · Provide an environment that supports the student's need · Encourage and support students to use technologies for learning · Apply multimedia format	(Bell, et al., 2011; Gasson & Agosto, 2008; Matulich, et al., 2008; McAlister, 2009; McMahon & Pospisil, 2005; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Price, 2009; Sweeney, 2006; Wilson, 2005; Wilson, 2004)
Sheltered- Helicopter parents	· Expect flexibility · Expect a lot of attention · Closely monitored · Push to excel · Need to learn to handle responsibilities by themselves	(Bell, et al., 2011; Elam, et al., 2007; Howe & Strauss, 2000, 2003; McAlister, 2009; McGlynn, 2008; Moore, 2007; Price, 2009; Wilson, 2004)
Entitled	· More choices more selectivity · Flexibility and convenience	(Hammer, et al., 2010; Sweeney, 2006)
Multitasking – Pressured	· Use games for learning · Accountability procedures · Diminished attention span · Need a variety of learning opportunities, vary pace of learning and methods	(Bell, et al., 2011; Borges, et al., 2010; Hammer, et al., 2010; Haytko, 2006; Howe & Strauss, 2000, 2003; Matulich, et al., 2008; McAlister, 2009; McMahon & Pospisil, 2005; Moore, 2007;

	· Learning retention · Stressed by pressure to perform	Sweeney, 2006)
Rule oriented – Structured	· Expect high proficiency testing · Accept rules	(Borges, et al., 2010; Elam, et al., 2007; Howe & Strauss, 2003; Moore, 2007; Sweeney, 2006; Wilson, 2005)
Immediate - Low in tolerance for delays	· Intolerance for delays · Hunger of information and problem solving · Feedback to increase time on task · Emphasize time on task	(Bell, et al., 2011; Hammer, et al., 2010; McGlynn, 2008; McMahon & Pospisil, 2005; Moore, 2007; Sweeney, 2006; Wilson, 2005; Wilson, 2004)
Special - Individualistic – customized	· Different social skills and standards · Communicate high expectations · Self-paced as possible · They want to feel equally special · Expect student-centered education · Teaching innovations · New learning environments	(Howe & Strauss, 2003; Sweeney, 2006; Wilson, 2005)
Confident - Optimistic	· Encourage confidence but guard against arrogance	(Bell, et al., 2011; Borges, et al., 2010; DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000, 2003; McAlister, 2009)
Apathy	· Unlikely to learn the material if they aren't interested in the subject matter · Participate and engage in active learning	(Haytko, 2006; Kothari, Rana, & Khade, 1993)

The literature has made the following suggestions for effectively teaching Millennials. Matulich et al. (2008) stress that these students like to learn at their own pace thus utilizing online materials for understanding the material is helpful so class time can be devoted to engaging interaction, demonstration, and collaborative learning; additionally, these students tend to be visual learners with short attention spans who do not process information in a linear fashion and who need to be convinced of the benefit of what you are making them do for the course. As this generation has never known life without the Internet, course technology is critical (McAlister, 2009). Additionally, achievement-oriented Millennials expect faculty to clearly spell out course goals, requirements, and how to achieve them along with providing strong feedback so they can monitor their progress and accomplishments (Borges, et al., 2010). Business faculty will need to encourage critical thinking and creative problem solving as students will be focusing on the rules and structure of the course (Wilson, 2005). Finally, faculty need to emphasize ethics, social responsibility, and community service as these are important to Millennials and are needed to develop for Millennials' productive contributions as professionals (Broido, 2004; Ferrell & Gonzalez, 2004; Wilson, 2005).

THE PRODUCT LIFE CYCLE APPROACH TO MARKETING CLASSES

As described by (Kotler & Keller, 2012), the Product Life Cycle (PLC) idea suggests that products have a limited life with sales and profits passing through distinct stages and that each of these stages poses different challenges and opportunities for marketers. These four stages are as follows (Kotler and Keller, 2012, pp. 310, 312):

Introduction – "a period of sales growth as the product is introduced in the market. Profits are nonexistent because of the heavy expense of product introduction." In this stage, marketers need to inform potential customers, induce product trial, and secure distribution.

Growth – "a period of rapid market acceptance and substantial profit improvement." In this stage, in order for marketers to sustain this growth they need to improve product quality and features, add new models or enter new segments, increase its distribution coverage, and lower prices to attract price-sensitive consumers.

Maturity – "a slowdown in sales growth because the product has achieved acceptance by most potential buyers. Profits stabilize or decline because of increased competition." In this stage, marketers need to recognize that products will go through three phases: growth where sales growth starts to slow, stability where sales per capita flatten due to saturation, and decaying maturity where sales decline as customers switch to other products. For marketers wishing to extend the life of the product, they need to either modify the market (expand the number of users or the increase the usage rate), the product (through quality, feature, or style improvements), or the marketing program (through changing nonproduct elements such as price, place, or promotion).

Decline – sales show a downward drift and profits erode. In this stage, marketers need to determine whether to harvest (gradually reduce investment while trying to maintain sales) or withdraw the product.

We offer that the PLC provides a useful framework for considering the life cycle of a class. From an instructional point of view we consider the instructor to be the marketer, and the product is course content. We believe student commitment to participate in class-sponsored learning is analogous to sales in the traditional PLC. Likewise, time devoted by the student to learning activities is analogous to price, whereas learning outcomes are analogous to profit.

Introduction: Building Structure

During the introductory phase of a class's life cycle, the focus of instruction needs to incorporate building student commitment to participate in class sponsored learning activities. This stage is especially important in the context of classes populated by structure seeking, rule following, multi-tasking, team oriented Millennials who seek multi-modal communication opportunities. From an instructional perspective, it is likely that none (or, at best, few) of the class's subject related learning objectives will be mastered by students during this phase. Instead, students will begin to engage with topic matter, the instructor(s), and one another utilizing the array of resources at their disposal, including class sponsored and external information and communication tools. The goal of instruction during this phase is to build student awareness of, and comfort with, the modes of communication and sources of information that will most directly contribute to desired learning outcomes during later phases of the life cycle. It is also important for the professor to set the standards for the rest of the course. The purpose is not to squelch involvement with other resources and communication tools, rather to build involvement with the assets and methods that will be the primary focus of the course in later stages of the life cycle. Failing to build structure along these lines early in a class is likely to have a negative impact on student learning, as course material and modes of communication are more likely to be displaced by students' pre-existing communication patterns and external sources of information. One indication that the introductory phase has effectively built the course's structure would be that the first source(s) students utilize to gather information on a topic is aligned with those that will be used by the instructor to disseminate information during the remainder of the term. Thus, the instructor has "secured distribution."

For the instructor, it is key in this phase to link the course activities to how the students will benefit from participating and completing these activities, not just for this class, but also for the long run with their careers. Keep in mind that "many students see their education as another acquisition to purchase rather than as a learning process (McGlynn, 2008, p. 20)." It is vital from the start of the course for the faculty member to demonstrate their course is current and relevant to their students (Price, 2009) and to take a pragmatic approach to the course (DeBard, 2004). An important aspect the first day of class is for the business instructor to "sell" the purpose of the course and its' benefits to the students. Additionally, given the team-orientation of this generation (Moore, 2007), they need opportunities to participate and work with their classmates (McGlynn, 2008). The instructor may want to incorporate group work with assignments or projects. Given the service orientation of this generation, a service-learning project that involves them working to help others in the community will appeal to this group (McGlynn, 2008; Moore, 2007). A useful activity the first week is to discuss the purpose of teams and go through scenarios of issues that may arise (see Reisenwitz and Eastman, 2006, for examples of how this could be done).

Another issue is that as this generation has been overscheduled with organized activities since childhood, they are craving rules and structure and will probably pay more attention to the syllabi than previous generations (Moore, 2007). The professor though needs to be upfront with the time requirements needed to succeed and be proactive with suggestions on time management for being successful in the course (McGlynn, 2008). Finally, the professor needs to address the Millennials' need for individualized flexibility in the course (Price, 2009; Sweeney, 2006). This could be done through letting students select group members, choose presentation dates among a list of available dates, and using online materials that students' can access on their timeframe. Finally, given their need for structure, it is recommended that the business instructor get the syllabus to the students as soon as possible, such as by posting it on a class site or emailing it to the students signed up for the course a week or so in advance, and encourage them to read it before the first day, so the first day of class can be used to truly discuss the syllabus rather than just pass it out.

Growth: Promoting Structure

During the growth phase of a class's life cycle instructors begin to demand and reinforce use of the existing structure in pursuit of learning (profit). The short attention span of Millennials suggests use of multiple brief activities in promoting course structures at this stage. Since time is analogous to price, these brief activities can be used to engage students who have been more reluctant participants. If online, multiple uses of very targeted media with short duration are likely to generate greater participation than is a lengthy presentation utilizing a single mode of communication. Likewise, in the traditional classroom, breaking a class into multiple segments, which engage students on topical material in different ways, will likely enhance student learning during this phase. One indication that a course is nearing the end of the growth phase would be a change in student focus from questions of structure and course expectations to questions related to the course's learning objectives. If, students are still seeking structure during later phases of the class life cycle, the rate at which learning objectives are attained will be inhibited and student satisfaction with the course will be lower.

In teaching the class, the traditional lecture will not work as these students want "visualizations, stimulations, games, and role playing, and we must create a rapid pace (McGlynn, 2008, p. 22)." The professor will want to incorporate video clips, such as from YouTube and in-class interactions, to get the students interested in the course (Price, 2009). Additionally, "Millennials view a professor's ability to effectively utilize technology as an indicator of his or her connectedness to their culture (Price, 2009, p. 7)." The instructor needs to acknowledge during this phase the students' high expectations for immediate response from faculty, "the traditional handful of in-person weekly office hours won't cut it anymore" (Moore, 2007, p. 46) as the instructor needs to use technology to help stay connected to the students. Thus, it is critical for prompt (within 24 hours) response time to students' questions as well as prompt grading of students' work (McGlynn, 2008; Moore, 2007; Price, 2009; Sweeney, 2006). This also involves building engaging relationships with students through knowing their name and building connections with them (Wilson, 2004), such as with chatting with them before class.

Maturity: Using Structure

As a class approaches maturity, the group's engagement level and learning rate will stabilize. If the instructor has been successful during the earlier phases, virtually all students will be utilizing course sponsored materials, communication structures, and learning strategies. Therefore, the engagement level and learning rate will not continue to expand. During this period virtually all the course learning objectives that will be successfully accomplished are satisfied. Students will have established a "budget", that is, a level of time they are willing to dedicate to the course on a regular basis. Eventually, as they perceive that they are near to achieving their learning objectives for the class, their time commitments will begin to decline. For Millennials especially, it is likely that this decline will be seen in reversion to use of non-course sponsored information and modes of communication. Hence, one indication that the class is entering the decline phase would be reduced utilization of course sponsored resources and increased prevalence of multi-tasking activities during periods of engagement with course materials. If this decline begins too early in the semester, instructors may wish to extend the life of the class by making alterations to the structure such as introducing heretofore unused external resources, expanding or modifying learning objectives, and/or changing tools and methods used for communication.

Something that the instructor needs to be on alert for in this stage is that Millennials' confidence in their ability to succeed in the class may exceed their actual performance and turn into arrogance (DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Stewart & Bernhardt, 2010). Remember that this is the generation that has been rewarded not just for winning, but just for trying (Moore, 2007). "Although we can offer realistic constructive criticism, we must be sensitive to the fact that they thrive on praise (McGlynn, 2008, p. 22)." It is critical for the instructor to provide feedback at numerous times during the term. If a term-long project is utilized, the instructor may need to break it up into smaller chunks that are submitted with opportunities for feedback and revision. Additionally, apathy may be an issue. Thus, the instructor needs to clearly link what is needed to succeed in the class in terms of student's actions with their performance and be willing to make adjustments, such as adding additional activities or materials in different formats to encourage Millennials' performance and to prevent apathy.

Decline: Dismantling Structure

Toward the end of a class, students will become more goal-oriented; supplanting any previous focus on achieving the course's learning objectives with a primary attention to completion of any remaining grade-related tasks. Learning rates will stall. The role of the instructor will be to maintain existing structures long enough for students to complete necessary tasks. Ultimately, many Millennials will sell their books, delete bookmarks in their web-browsers, and defriend classmates on Facebook, while leaving them on their Linked-In contacts list. They may even revert to Wikipedia and Google searches for information related to the course's learning objectives. At this stage, instructors may withdraw the product by bringing down the course's online presence at the end of the term. Alternatively, if the course is a prerequisite in a program where many of the students will remain in interaction with one another, the instructor may seek to "harvest" the product by reducing their level of involvement while also providing for ongoing student access to course resources and structures.

An issue with the millennial generation that may arise here is their sense of entitlement (Hammer et al., 2010; Howe & Strauss, 2000). This is a generation that has grown up with their helicopter parents emphasizing their self-esteem and "praising them even for modest accomplishments, treating them as special and important (Hammer et al., 2010, p. 299)." This may come into conflict with the grades that the student receives at the end of the term. To avoid this problem, it is critical that the instructor emphasize early in the term, what is needed and expected to succeed in the course and to provide timely feedback throughout the semester so students know where they stand and what they need to do to improve. The use of graded feedback earlier in the term will help reduce this issue. Finally, instructors need to clearly outline in the syllabus what the process is for handling any grade disputes and to direct the student to the process to follow and structure for addressing their concerns (DeBard, 2004).

CONCLUSIONS

As business faculty, we need to "embrace the reality that our campuses will be different as our students change (Broido, 2004, p. 73)." This article highlighted key characteristics of the millennial student as described in the literature and discussed how this generation of student can be better addressed through organizing a course using the framework of the Product Life Cycle: (1) Introduction – Building Structure, (2) Growth – Promoting Structure, (3) Maturity – Using Structure, and (4) Decline – Dismantling Structure. Throughout all the stages of a course, "student engagement is the key to academic motivation, persistence, and degree completion" (McGlynn, 2008, p. 19) as millennial students are ultimately looking for faculty who are energetic, upbeat, open-minded, flexible, alert to student's understand and needs, approachable, and caring (Price, 2009). Future research is needed to empirically measure the impact of utilizing this framework on student satisfaction, gains in students' development of knowledge and skills, and students' success in applying what they have learned in their marketing courses to the real world.

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NOTES