Chapter 19

Experiential Learning through Virtual Scenarios

Karen Le Rossignol
Deakin University, Australia

ABSTRACT

With workplaces potentially including four generations, the differing motivations and learning styles provide new challenges to educators, as well as managers and leaders of these workforces. The Net Generation learner of the twenty first century, born after 1980 and digital media fluent, brings potentially greater collaboration and connection to knowledge and learning as a collective, rather than individual, learning process. A postgraduate Masters in Communication course explored immersive learning in two collaborative virtual and workplace-oriented environments. The Net Generation learners were able to identify the connective and experiential nature of their engagement in the virtual scenario and experiential collaborative project as being both transforming and transferable to the workplaces they were targeting through their coursework programs. The case studies explored the neomillennial learning styles as a media-based framework for designing learning tools and environments appropriate for the twenty first century learner.

INTRODUCTION

The millennial learners, those Net Generation learners of the twenty first century who are time poor, who may be committed to a wide range of activities and with specific personal priorities within which the university or training organization is expected to fit, require a blend of learning approaches to fit their social needs and learning styles. The employer of the twenty first century is looking for someone who is a great communicator, can handle negotiation and conflict and is capable of working seamlessly in a team. The research questions posed in this chapter ask: What sorts of approaches are going to capture the learning needs of the Net Generation? What technologies and learning designs are most appropriate to achieve the interpersonal skills described?
To address these questions, three elements of tertiary experiential learning environments will be considered in this chapter. First, we will explore the Net Generation’s learning needs and styles, focusing on the learning styles of the millennial, or “neomillennial” as described by Dede (2005a, p.10) learner of the twenty first century. Second, application of immersive design to experiential learning is examined in relation to its development of a collaborative learning community focused on a collective intelligence and experiences rather than information. Finally, in order to get the blend of learning technologies ‘right’, virtual environments and immersive project work are offered as specific learning environments for experiential learning.

These elements will be explored using two case studies. Both case studies target local Australian and international postgraduate coursework students within an Australian university with expectations of experiential learning outcomes and opportunities. The first will describe immersion in a virtual environment and the second will use a workplace-based project to deliver team-based communications outcomes. The context of this virtual immersion exploration is the nexus between postgraduate professional communications coursework and the workplaces requiring those communications graduates.

**BACKGROUND**

The learner of the twenty first century may be prepared to take control of their learning, but this learner is best resourced or facilitated by educational designers and teachers whose perspective comes from the point of view of the learner. This approach has arisen from a tradition of constructivist learning theory as developed from the findings and conclusions of Dewey (1916), Piaget (as described by Atherton 2005) and others. According to constructivist theory, learners did not see knowledge as independent of the meaning they constructed for it from their own experiences (Hein, 1991). This has led to a focus on the learner, more than the knowledge to be taught, and has been strongly aligned with experiential learning principles (Dede, 2005a). Active involvement of the learner, emphasized by social constructivists such as Von Glasersfeld (1989), has assisted learners in finding their own explanations of their environment, moving them from a passive to an active role. As Dede (2005a) has recommended, it is therefore useful to start the exploration of experiential learning approaches with a profile of the learner. To achieve this, we shall begin our exploration with a review of Net Generation and neomillennial learners.

**The Net Generation and Neomillennials**

**Characteristics**

Characteristics of the generations currently in educational settings and workplaces, as facilitators, lecturers, designers, students, workers, team leaders or managers are summarized from the analysis of Arnsparger (2008), who is considering intergenerational issues and individuals in a range of roles as colleagues, cohorts and customers. The World War II generation, born before 1940, has a strong commitment to communities and family, and is motivated by receiving respect for knowledge and experience (Arnsparger 2008). The Baby Boomers, born within the timeframe 1940s to 1960s, (Arnsparger 2008) have been taught to get along with others, and have been a strong force for participative workplace management and team building practices. Generation X is the generation of the 1960s to 1980s, the largest percentage of today’s workforce (Arnsparger 2008). They are independent, willing to work hard, adaptable to working outside the rules or system. As Arnsparger (2008) states, they are self-reliant, and they also want life beyond work. Finally, from the years 1980 to 2000, there are...