Strengthening Intercultural Effectiveness among the Millennials

by Amanda White

According to the United Nations World Population Prospects there are more than 1.5 billion people between the ages of 10 and 24, the largest generation in human history. This generational cohort is entering adulthood in a time of tremendous global transformations in the economy, education, communication, demographics, the environment, technologies, and culture. But are there learning needs and styles particular to the Millennials, individuals born between 1980 and 2000? In this article, we examine the Centre for Intercultural Learning’s practices and findings with regard to training in intercultural competencies in the context of a youth exchange program. We show that variables beyond demographics such as the context of training, client mandates and the recognition of youth’s prior intercultural experiences in complex multicultural environments play a vital role in shaping learning interventions.

The Millennial’s Hallmark: Globalization

Each year, Canadian government departments and organizations prepare and send thousands of Canadians, including many young people in their early 20s, abroad to work or volunteer in a wide range of capacities in developing and developed countries. These capacities are becoming specialized, including work in the field of human rights, social justice, gender equality, and good governance. Indeed, the environment of international work has changed as a result of global trends and it is much more complex and multifaceted than even just a few years ago, increasing the need for training in intercultural effectiveness for youth and professionals alike.

The Millennial Learner

New information and communication technologies (ICTs) are said to have influenced core values, beliefs, and attitudes among the Millennials and speculations on the impact of mass media in the creation of a “global youth culture” abound. Research identifies a number of general core values of this generation, including: tenacity, ambition, morality, being well-mannered, caring and respectful, accepting of diversity, and dedication.

In the literature on international volunteer experiences, Millennials are often characterized in two very opposing ways: either in derogatory terms, as “unengaged and/or selfish” or as “vanguard activists, engaged global citizens or the generation of change”. But what do these characteristics and attributes mean for the training of young people in intercultural effectiveness?

Adult Learning in Context

A 2009 report by the Conference Board of Canada, Winning the Generation Wars, concludes that managing a multigenerational workforce involves much more than knowing the profiles of the “typical” generational cohort. Similarly, research on adult learning in the twenty-first century suggests that trainers move beyond designing courses based on sweeping stereotypes about generational learning styles. The specifics of the training needs and sociocultural background of the participants are considered more important to the development of learning interventions. We illustrate this with an example below, following a brief introduction to the Centre for Intercultural Learning.

Centre for Intercultural Learning

The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (DFAIT), as represented by its training arm, the Canadian Foreign Service Institute’s (CFSI) Centre for Intercultural Learning (CIL) provides learning services in Intercultural Effectiveness to a variety of clientele.

The core mission for the Centre is to provide intercultural effectiveness expertise at the individual and
organizational levels to support clients and their partners to help them achieve their policy and program objectives in an intercultural environment. In 2008-2009, the Centre delivered courses to nearly 8,000 individuals. More than 3,000 of these participants were trained for the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Approximately one-third of this group were from youth-sending volunteer organizations.

The Centre’s courses build on research that identifies core behavioral-based competencies of the interculturally effective person (IEP). In a recent transfer-level evaluation of intercultural learning that involved sixty-five development co-operants in the field, the Centre concluded that innovation skills and resilience are increasingly important competencies in today’s uncertain and complex environment of international work. How does the Centre’s training support young people in their development of these and other intercultural effectiveness competencies?

Case Study: Intercultural Exchange between Youth

The Intercultural Exchange between Youth (IEY, a pseudonym) was created in the early 1970s. The organization’s mission is to increase the ability of youth to actively participate in sustainable community-level development projects. The exchange program advocates a policy of non-formal education or learning by doing, a model in which young volunteers learn by getting involved in communities in Canada and in another country. IEY offers international educational programs for youth aged 17 to 21. The organization gives young people from different cultures the opportunity to live together for up to half a year to work on community-based projects.

The exchange program is divided into two parts. For the first few months, young people from Canada and another country live and work together in a Canadian community and, in the remaining few months of the exchange, the youth move to the partner country.

At the beginning of the exchange program in Canada, IEY offers a four day Pre-departure Camp that includes a two-day CIL course in Intercultural Effectiveness. The goal of the Centre’s training is to support IEY’s mandate by increasing intercultural awareness among the volunteers and helping them to further strengthen their questioning and critical thinking skills. The two-day course is designed to explore tools that will assist volunteers from Canada and the exchange country to get the most out of the intercultural experience.

Half of the volunteers in the training are from the exchange country and half are from Canada. There are usually an equal number of young women and men. Typically, volunteers from the exchange country would have only arrived in Canada a day or two before the CIL training. The Pre-departure camps are usually held in rural, remote locations without access to ICTs. In most cases, the volunteers do not yet speak the language of their counterparts. This also means that although CIL delivers courses primarily in French and English, volunteers, especially from the partner country, do not necessarily speak or understand these languages well.

The particularities of this group influenced the course design and facilitation process. Although the course builds on the experiential learning model of adult education and it is based on the Centre’s IEP research, it is also true that kinesthetic activities and easy-to-remember frameworks seem to work well for this diverse and multi-lingual group, which is in the beginning stages of group formation. For example, volunteers learn about one another, each other’s values and their countries through activities that require them to either draw images or physically move around the room. The activities are designed to encourage the group to apply learning tools for bridging differences and identifying similarities.

Although the volunteers are similar in age, there are a number of sociocultural differences and similarities that exist between the Canadians and their counterparts and within these country groups as well. Even though there are “dominant” regional cultures in each exchange country, volunteers come from diverse communities. Most have therefore already had intercultural experiences in their home communities or countries. For example, in one activity, volunteers are asked to identify values that they hold dearly. Initially, the responses are quite similar, if not identical (e.g. respect, justice, equality, etc). When we ask the volunteers to move around the classroom to a statement posted on the wall that best captures their reaction to a situation, they respond with enthusiasm, but also surprise. The learners see that while on the
surface they may share similar values, in practice, there are significant differences. Importantly, these differences are not solely attributed to national culture; rather they reflect diversity among the volunteers, with some sharing similar worldviews and values as their exchange counterparts and others having more in common with their country group.

What are the Implications of this Case Study for Training in Intercultural Effectiveness?

The continual (re)combination of cultural practices and values among the Millennials could be interpreted as a challenge in training. Yet, as highlighted in the case study, the eagerness of IEY volunteers to understand one another’s value systems and their curiosity to learn about each other’s countries and cultural practices are opportunities to crystallize intercultural competencies. The fact that many among this diverse group are not solidly anchored to a particular framework for explaining the world suggests openness towards the discovery and eventual embodiment of cross-cultural competence.

Concluding Thoughts

The collaboration between CIL and IEY shows that it is not commonly-held core values and attributes like an “information-age mindset”, or popular stereotypes that characterize Millennials as either “selfish” or as “agents of change” that shape learning interventions in intercultural effectiveness for youth. To the contrary, the Centre’s course featured in this article is influenced by multiple variables, among them: the specifics of the exchange program, the varied sociocultural backgrounds of the volunteers, and their shared enthusiasm to learn and appropriate tools to make the best out of the intercultural experience. Learning needs and styles are particular to this example but importantly these are not the sole consequence of a “typical” generational cohort. This case study of an international youth exchange challenges preconceived notions of “the high-tech Millennial learner” to embrace the rich diversity of learners’ cultural practices, lifestyles and circumstances. Time will tell whether the training in intercultural effectiveness and the experience of the exchange program will support the volunteers in their possible quest to create innovative solutions to global problems, a competency crucial in today’s complex environment of international work.

Endnotes


3 Rachel Mendleson Maclean’s (2008): 50-52;