Deconstructing the Challenges of Teaching Social Work Millennial Students with Diverse Learning Styles at Two Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Gertrude C. Jackson\textsuperscript{a}, Larry D. Williams\textsuperscript{b}, Janet Burton\textsuperscript{c}, and Blenda R. Crayton\textsuperscript{d}

\textsuperscript{a,b} North Carolina Central University
\textsuperscript{c} University of the District of Columbia
\textsuperscript{d} North Carolina Central University

Abstract

This study emerged from the interests of several social work instructors at two historically black colleges and universities to identify and implement best teaching strategies for engaging their Millennial social work students in the learning process. A mixed-method, exploratory study was conducted to explore 50 students’ perceptions in three areas: learning style preferences; best teaching strategies for helping them to learn social work content; and student/teacher relationship influences on their learning. The results show students’ preferences for a student-centered and active/supportive learning style that combines auditory, visual, and learning through experiences. They prefer a personal relationship with teachers who demonstrate a genuine sense of caring, commitment, guidance, and support.
Keywords: learning styles; teaching strategies; student/teacher relationships; social work students; Millennial

Deconstructing the Challenges of Teaching Social Work Millennial Students with Diverse Learning Styles at Two Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Millennial students were born and reared in a complex and changing technological environment, which gives them easy access to an abundance of current events and information in a global society (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). A substantive literature (Howe & Strauss, 2003; Gallien & Peterson, 2005) exists on the characteristics of this cohort and their learning styles. Research portrays Millennials as a racially and ethnically diverse group who are high achievers, technically shrewd, conventional, team-oriented students, who best learn through discovery-by-doing. (Howe & Strauss, 2003; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Pinder-Grove & Groscurth, 2009; Roehling, Kooi, Dykemia, Quisenberry, & Vandler, 2011) Furthermore, they are interactive, self-directed, and easily bored, and prefer informal settings for learning (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Roehling et al., 2011).

A small body of research (Gallien Jr., & Peterson, 2005; Rovai, Gallien, Wighting, 2005; Massey, Kim, & Mitchell, 2011; Strayhorn, 2011) is written on African American Millennials as learners. This research (Watkins, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005) portrays African American college students as more likely to be field-dependent learners who relate learning to life experiences and who rely on examples and observations to further their understanding of concepts. They prefer in-class instructions, face-to-face interaction, small group discussions rather than lectures, and questions and answers styles of teaching (Rovai et al., 2005).

According to the literature (Freeman & Walsh, 2013), teaching Millennial students is challenging. Millennials challenge educators to deal with their short attention span, preference for informal learning, and an over-reliance on communication technology that is associated to underdeveloped face-to-face contacts and limitations in critical thinking skills and self-introspection skills (Bart, 2012; Journal of College Admission, 2007). Moreover, Millennial students spend less time studying when compared to past generations (Furbeck, Harding, Wohlgemuth & Bousket, 2003).

These characteristics often pose challenges for the teacher-centered professors in creating learning environments conducive to meeting the demands and expectations for learning for both students and faculty. For example, Long and Colden (2006) suggest student learners and instructors bring various styles to approaching learning in the classroom; however, the teaching styles of instructors are most likely predominant. Research suggests teachers of Millennial students are most likely to be of prior generations who teach as they were with lecture oriented and teacher-centered instruction (Gallien, 2005). In historically black colleges and universities, "the teaching styles of most professors tend to dominate the classroom with a challenging yet

Although there is no agreed upon definition for learning styles and many models of learning styles exist (Rovai et al., 2005), Long and Colden (2006, p. 239) cite Grasha (1996) who poses "learning styles are shaped by students’ experiences and teachers’ styles can shape learning styles." Banda, Flowers, Robinson, Royal, Santos, & Zuniga, (2011) suggest that students have their own perspective and their own unique past of experiences of themselves. Therefore, it is important for educators to understand the characteristics of students’ learning styles, in the cultural context of which learning occurs for students.

Therefore, the goals of this study are to explore social work college students’ perceptions in three areas: learning style preferences, best teaching strategies for helping them to learn social work content, and student/teacher relationship influences on their learning. Findings from this study will help social work educators effectively prepare instructions for teaching Millennial social work students.

Method

Participants

The sample selection consisted of 50 social work students (45 undergraduates and 5 graduates) recruited from two social work programs located at two urban historically black colleges and universities in the southeast. The age range was 19-30, with a mean age of 22.27 (SD = 2.99). Ninety-two percent (n = 46) of the participants were Black/African American and 94% (n = 47) were female. Sixty percent (n = 30) of the students were employed with the majority 54% (n = 27) reporting part-time employment.

Materials

The researchers of this study developed two instruments for data collection. The first instrument consisted of 40 items, which includes an 18-items, Likert-type, five point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree, and 5 = not applicable) on learning styles and four open-ended questions on effective teaching strategies. Question samples were "I am a visual learner," "I learn best by working alone versus working in groups," and "List the most effective strategy used by one of your social work instructors that help you learn." In addition, the questionnaire queries when students are most likely to study for class and the number of hours committed for studying. The second instrument, a semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire, explored six areas:

(a) Students’ preference styles for learning (What is your preferred style for learning?)

(b) Students’ interests (When you think about your social work courses, what content are you most interested in learning?)

(c) Classroom environment (When are you most likely to engage in classroom activities?)
(d) Student and teacher relationship (How would you define a student/teacher relationship?)

(e) Teachers’ strategies for student learning (When you are familiar with the social work course content, which teaching strategies are most helpful?)

(f) Socio-economic influences associated to learning (Identify and discuss how your life events are associated to class attendance, active class participation).

Procedure and Analysis

The researchers conducted the IRB approved mixed-method, exploratory study at both universities between March and April 2011. Both universities used flyers and classroom announcements to recruit students from all social work courses. Social work professors granted permission for student assistants to announce the study in their classes, to request class time to conduct the study, and to administer the questionnaire. Students voluntarily completed self-administered questionnaires and participated in one of three focus groups. Duration of the self-administered questionnaire was 12-15 minutes and 60 minutes for the focus groups. Between both universities, nine African American female students participated in three focus groups. The coding of questionnaires ensured the exclusion of identifiable information to students’ responses.

The researchers used The Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) to provide a descriptive analysis (i.e., frequencies and percentages) of students' preferred learning styles, demographic data, and study time. Data collected from the three focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. Using the categories from the qualitative questionnaire, three group facilitators reviewed and discussed the data to identify similarities and differences to formulate agreed upon concepts and themes.

Results

Academic Performance and Class Preparation Time

Fifty percent \((n = 25)\) of the social work students rated their academic performances as "very good" whereas, the other half rated their academic performance as "good" \((n = 16, 32.7\%\), "excellent" \((n = 6, 12.2\%)\), and "fair" \((n = 2, 4.1\%)\). Time spent studying for each social work class ranged from 2 hours to 4 hours a week. Students were most likely to spend 2 hours \((n = 16, 32\%)\) and 3 hours a week \((n = 13, 26.5\%)\) studying. Four students \((8\%)\) spent less than 1 hour a week studying for a social work class. Students were more likely to study in the evening \((n = 21, 42\%)\) and late night \((n = 16, 32\%)\) and less likely to study in the morning \((n = 30, 60\%)\) for classes.

The group facilitators asked students, "How much time do you use to prepare for each social work class?" The responses ranged from uncertainty about the amount of time to what they were doing in the class. The responses were:
"I’m not sure, I mean when I’m like you know, just taking time to look up the material or just trying to do the work that was given, I really don’t look at the time or anything. I just do it until either I get tired or I don’t know."

"I guess it depends on what we’re doing, sometimes you know I might not do anything. I might just get my books and go to class but if it’s like maybe a test or you know we have to read something we are going to discuss in class, then I feel like maybe you know it’s important for me to know, I might need to read this or go over it before I go to class so I’ll know what’s going on."

"I’ll say before each class and maybe like an hour and a half just to go over what we’re going to be doing."

"I’m the type of person that waits until the last minute, which is not good so like if it’s before a test or something, then I tend to spend more time than I should."

"I would say probably about an hour or two. Now that’s if I’ve got something specific, like if I know I got a test. I’m going to be totally honest, I am so last minute, I mean that’s just how I am. I will sit in front of a computer, have an assignment for days, know it’s due. I will sit there and it just won’t come to me. I can’t get started, I’ll jot down notes, I’ll start over, and it just does not work. But you give me about an hour before class, when it is due, I’m on it. It comes together, I’m focused. I’ve always been like that and it works for me."

Overall, students rated their academic performance between excellent and good, spent 2 hours to 3 hours studying per week for each class, preferred studying in the evening and late night, and spent less time preparing for social work classes, and that depended on the assignment.

Preferred Learning Styles

The Millennial social work students of this study preferred three learning styles: (a) visual (n = 40, 80%), (b) learning by both visual and auditory (n = 47, 94%), and (c) learning by doing (n = 47, 94%). Although students reported learning best by working alone than by working in groups (n = 33, 66%), they actively participated in group projects (n = 48, 96%). All participants in the three focus groups identified visual and active learning styles. Visual learners preferred professors to use power points with pictures and videos when they lectured. Professors using creative ways of displaying the information helped them to make sense of the content and to stay engaged.

For most group participants, they preferred active learning styles. They learned best when they were able to participate in practice activities, such as challenging games and community service projects that simulate real life experiences. They want to observe and be active participants in their learning rather than told what to do. Students reported learning by doing and active learning styles helped them to retain what they learn and to stay on tasks. Examples of active learning were:
"I guess maybe having things more like hands on where you actually walk through the steps of how we’re supposed to interact with clients, like role playing so that we can get a better perspective of how to interact with clients outside of the classroom environment."

"Get students up and moving about in and outside the classroom."

"I guess for me, when we are allowed to do group work, interact with students, and present in front of the class, it allows me to actually remember what’s taught. And when other students are allowed to present things taught in class, it helps me to remember."

"I can read out of a book all day but I’m really not going to get it unless I can see it or if I have an example or something."

In addition, a student participant acknowledged team learning as a helping strategy that helped her to learn. She stated,

"The student on the same level as me or the same classification as me, we were pretty much able to help each other, so we were like a team worker group thing. We would talk in the classroom, outside the classroom during the week, on the weekends. Whatever it was we were there to help each other because one person may understand…then another person could be behind; so I think it’s the group that helps me."

The least preferred learning style was listening (n = 36, 72%), which was mostly associated with teachers’ lectures. Group participants were least likely to listen and participate in class when they felt excluded by professors and believed their opinions were not important. A student commented,

"When the teacher is standing up and just talking the whole time and I’m really trying to engage in class and everything, but they just lecture the whole time."

"You have professors who just want you to listen to what they are saying and just do whatever they ask, and not give my input."

Another student participant concurred,

"I think I agree, but I also think a lot of times, they don’t leave that opened to us, so we can sit and discuss things. They just want to continue to get through the chapter, so it is like you’re holding up the class because they have to spend this particular time to go into details about something they have already explained, or they feel as though they don’t need to explain."

Lecturing alone conflicted with most of the students’ learning styles. One student made this observation:
"I don’t want to cause no confusion with a professor, if that’s how they teach... because a lot of instructors have been doing the same thing a long time, and so that’s what they are most comfortable with. They don’t want to get on Blackboard, or do this or that.”

Another student stated, "I think the professor gets really kind of offended by the fact that nobody really wants to hear their lectures."

However, students were more receptive to hearing lectures when teachers shared their past social work practice experiences and allowed students to talk about their life experiences. A student stated, "I guess hearing professors talk about their life experiences... can make you think about the different things that you can do in the field.” Students appeared to learn vicariously through the personal work experiences of their professors. Listening to the social work professors’ work experiences made them aware of what to expect and how to deal with it. In addition, they were more tolerant of lectures with a combination of visual aids and handouts.

These findings are congruent to the research on the learning styles of African American college students. They are not a monolithic group of learners - no one style fits all. However, they are more inclined to a socially oriented style that allows for learning with others, around others, and in interactions with others (Banda et al., 2011). They prefer experiential activities that incorporate technology such as a variety of visual aids and social networking cites. They want more hands-on experiences that include community service projects and role-playing. They reject lecturing except when professors used it as a way of sharing their work experiences or when it included multimedia items or visual aids.

Classroom Environment

In general, 82% (n = 41) of the students reported preparing for class. Most of the students perceived themselves as active participants in class discussions (n = 40, 86%) and in class exercises (n = 47, 94%). Forty-four percent (n = 22) agreed they learned best by asking instructors and 40% (n = 20) of students agreed to learning best by asking classmates instead of instructors. Most students agreed (n = 38, 76%) that they learned best by asking instructors questions after class. Students disagreed (n = 27, 54%) that social work instructors’ teaching styles matched with their learning styles: whereas, 44% (n = 22) of students agreed. Students reported e-mail (n = 37, 74%), Blackboard (n = 34, 68%), power point (n = 34, 68%), and audience respond cards (clickers) (n = 12, 24%) as the top four technologies that would best help them learn in social work classes.

Focus group participants agreed they were more likely to engage in class discussions when they understood and felt comfortable discussing the course content and when the information was interesting and meant something to them. For example, two group participants stated,

"I’m most likely to engage in classroom activities if I know what I’m talking about...."

"When a teacher presents content that interest me, I fully participate, I may go and do independent research on my own and kind of get more familiar with the subject."
Group participants were least likely to engage in classroom participation when they did not understand the class lecture; the teacher did most of the talking, teacher "throwing out facts, when they needed more background information for understanding, and when they were not interested in the topic. When they disengaged in class, they were more likely to text and surf the web, "tune out" the professor because the subject was not interesting, think about other things, and pretend to listen but not be as enthusiastic about learning. Their suggestions to teachers for helping students to become more engaged in class participation were to offer a variety of new and different types activities. For example,

"When professors come up with different and new activities for us to do, rather than the same old thing every day in class, then that helps make me to keep interest in classes and to learn better."

"I think I would get them [students] up and moving around. When we just sit in these chairs and we are just listening and looking, I think we tend to zone out more."

"If we had a round table discussion, it gives everybody a chance to say something and give their opinions, and it gives students a chance to look at situations differently."

"I like power points, I like visual aids as far as movies, and I like documentaries. We saw one not long ago and it was really interesting, I don’t really know how you could implement some type of game to be played during the classroom time that would get us involved."

Students were receptive to professors providing secondary readings and handouts from agencies to reinforce their teachings and to clarify information in the textbook. Students also preferred Blackboard, such as discussion board, and clickers because they facilitated student participation and immediate feedback. Although cell phones and texting ranked low in students’ choices of using technology in the classroom, one student preferred texting because it served as a quick resource to information to assist with her learning. She stated, “Texting, that’s all what I like, I like to surf the web...a word that I don’t know what in the world it is, I’ll get on Dictionary.com and look it up and try to use it in a sentence.”

In regards to classroom environment, findings from this study suggest students want their learning environment and teaching materials (Reiner & Willingham, 2010) to reflect or match-up with their diverse learning styles. They want activities to be interesting and relevant to their learning.

**Teacher and Student Relationships**

The study explored social work students' perceptions about student and teacher relationships, and how this relationship is associated to how they learn, by asking two questions: "How would you define a student and teacher relationship?" "How important is this relationship in helping you learn?" The participants perceived teachers creating a comfortable classroom
environment of trust for self-expression as important for establishing a teacher and student relationship. A group participant stated:

"A relationship that brings the professor and student together, where the student feels opened to discussing different issues, either student or professor related, different learning styles, assignments, and whatever it may be."

Several group participants wanted teachers to illustrate a sense of caring by taking time to understand them and to being sensitive to students’ differences. A student stated:

"I think the relationship with a professor gives me a connection with the class and without that connection I have to fend for my own ways to learn. I think without a connection with them, you know, with them explaining the curriculum, you know, or the notes in detail to me...If I can get that connection with them, that’s real important for me to learn."

Group participants associated their learning to teachers having a personal commitment to their learning, being accessible when they needed assistance, and helping them to be successful in and outside of the classroom environment. For example, two students shared:

"Being able to go to teachers and talk to them about any problem that you’re having and not understanding and the teachers understand where you are coming from."

"Like, I’m [teacher] here for you, you call me....ah I just feel like they should be committed you know."

"I think when you have a student/teacher relationship it makes you want to work harder in that class, you know you pay more attention....you know getting advised, talking about what’s going on in the classroom. I think it is real important, it makes me work harder and do good work in the class."

One of the students looked toward teachers for guidance and support. She stated,

"I guess in my opinion.....I think the teacher is the provider of information and students are consumers of information; the professors are here to basically guide us through our profession, to help us, to give us understanding of what is to be expected and what we are supposed to know. I don’t know, I guess I look to them for help whenever we need it, just supposed to have a comfortable relationship with our professors where we could know that, well okay, if I need help then they are there if I need some type of understanding. Then they’ll take time to help me, that’s basically what I think a student/teacher relationship is about."

The literature on African American students suggest "students learn most from teachers who are warm, friendly, approachable, and foster close personal relationships" (Anderson & Anderson, 1987, as cited by Rovai et al., 2005). Four major concepts emerged from the teacher/student relationships supported by the literature: commitment (Hirt, Amelink, McFeeters, © 2014 Delta State University
& Strayhorn, 2008), sense of caring (Hirt et al., 2008) and guidance and support (Patterson, Hale, & Gowens, 2011). Students expressed a need for teachers to affirm them as learners, to take time to know them, and to demonstrate interest and enthusiasm toward them and teaching. They wanted teachers to make a commitment to their learning and actively participate in their success in and outside of the classroom.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore Millennial social work students’ perceptions of their preferred learning styles and preferred teaching strategies for helping them to engage the learning process, along with exploring their perceptions of the student/teacher relationship on their learning. Findings from the mixed-method research found similar characteristics of our Millennial social work students’ learning styles with the general population of Millennial African American students’ learning styles. Our students prefer more active learning with experiential activities (Roehling et al., 2011; Watkins, 2005) and a team-oriented environment (Banda et al., 2011), rather than passive learning associated with lectures (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Students’ boredom, inattentiveness, distractions, and disengagement were most likely to be associated to teacher-centered instruction (Layne, 2012; Werth & Werth, 2011) rather than a learner-centered instruction. Research (Layne, 2012, & Werth & Werth) suggests Millennial students are more likely to engage in classroom participation when teaching instruction is more student-centered (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010), which favors group interactivity. Although social work students reported learning best by working alone versus in a group, they preferred small group discussion and team study groups. Their concerns about groups were associated to group members not doing their fair share of the work, not taking the group assignment seriously, and not committing time to the project.

Student and teacher relationship is very important to social work students, since building personal relationships (Hirt et al., 2008; DuBois & Miley, 2014, Grasha, 2002) fosters and supports (Hirt et al., 2008) learning in the classroom. In this study, Millennial social work students want to learn through faculty’s personal experiences or real life experiences. The research of Pattison, Hale, & Gowens (2011) states,

"Students are more likely to be satisfied and successful in classes when they perceive that their professors primarily care about them as individuals rather than merely concentrating on the transfer of knowledge. When students are permitted to know professors as individuals through short-stories about related outside work, it can create an atmosphere of trust."

Therefore using a personal teaching style takes teachers out of a teacher-centered or didactic teaching mode and moves them into a guiding and supportive mode (Grasha, 2002), which the students of this study associate to their learning. Findings from this study can be considered with caution in teaching African American Millennial college social work students given the limitations of the study such as small sample size and instruments used for data collection that prevent generalizability of the findings.
Implications for Social Work Education

Millennial African American social work students from both historically black colleges and universities prefer teaching instructions that are culturally relevant, student-centered, socially oriented, and attentive to multiple learning styles that allow for active engagement. Several findings from this study would benefit social work faculty wanting to shift from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered approach.

Learning Styles

Start where the students are. This involves taking an assessment of students’ content knowledge and learning strengths and challenges (Carter & Castenall, 2005). Research suggests that understanding students’ learning styles provide guidance to instructors on balancing their teaching approaches (Litzinger, Lee, Wise, & Felder, 2007).

Teaching Styles

Modify instructional techniques. This involves minimizing lectures and creating instructional strategies (Banda et al., 2011) that incorporate technology and experiential activities that are culturally relevant and inclusive of diverse learning styles. Social work educators may begin by examining how they can demonstrate “mastery” of some specific practice behaviors. For example, “respond to contexts that shape practice.” Carter and Castenell (2005, p. 89) state,

“If opportunities for student learning in the authentic community of reference are not available, faculty then create a context in courses whereby students reflect on course content using such venues as narratives, case study vignettes, and role plays. Instructional material is used that encourages students to examine authentic learning situations from multiple perspectives—that is beyond the dominant views presented in textbook and curricula.”

Research suggests experiential activities make learning more exciting as students remember content (Freeman & Wash, 2011). These activities are most effective for helping social work faculty integrate their social work practice experiences with course content. If social work practitioners should view themselves as learners and engage their clients/consumers when they work as informants, educators should also embrace this in the classroom.

Teacher and Student Relationships

Establish a caring, committed, and supportive relationship with students. The research (Pattison et al., 2011) suggests students are more likely to be successful in class when they perceive their professors as caring and being able to respond with positive regard and empathy, which are primary social work practice skills needed for building relationships (DuBois & Miley, 2014). Teacher and student relationships involve social work faculty making a commitment to students’ success in all walks-of-life, a major goal for historically black colleges and universities (Gallien, 2005).
References


© 2014 Delta State University


