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Incorporating multimodal projects for enhancing Millennial learning

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Teaching Strategy and Purpose

Traditionalists categorize learners as either visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. Gardner (1983) proposes that students are not easily categorized in one category and that intelligence is comprised of eight categories in different proportions: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal intelligence, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Multiple intelligences suggest each learner begins with a different skill set and expectations; however, technology provides educators with the means to meet the varied demands of each student. More recently multimodal teaching and learning has become popular within the academic arena allowing instructors to effectively address different learning styles (Stein, 2011). According to Jewitt (2008), “the pedagogic aim of multiliteracies is to attend to the multiple and multimodal texts and wide range of literacy practices that students are engaged with” (p. 245). Millennial students are different from past generations in that they have had unlimited access to digital technology for a majority of their existence (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009). The use of technology represents a cultural shift; therefore Millennial students bring a diverse and unique set of literacy skills never witnessed before. Support has been found for including multimodal practices in learning and teaching; however, limited literature has examined theoretical support for incorporating multimodal projects in curriculum. This paper outlines theoretical support for incorporating a multimodal project in retailing, consumer behavior and marketing courses.

Support for Implementation

Construction of meaning. Motivation for integrating educational tools and technologies into coursework is fueled by the desire to improve the engagement and learning of students. This same premise can apply to mediums in which students are assessed on. If students are engaged more and learn better through multimodal teaching, then it stands to reason that assignments that require multimodality provide Millennials additional learning benefits. Jewitt (2008) argues that each mode of learning contributes to the construction of meaning in different ways, thus demonstration of that learning would be best manifested in multimodal assignments.

Social change in communication. With the increase in digital modalities, visual literacy and assessment has become increasingly important in the development of analysis, problem solving, and discipline-specific knowledge (Barton & Ryan, 2014). This paper proposes that using multimodal functionality acts as a ‘trigger’ that enables in-depth understanding of concepts and provides a foundation for further investigation of complex phenomena. Multimodal projects are not meant to replace traditional forms of assessment (e.g. papers, exams, quizzes), but should be used to expand upon those forms, providing Millennials with a cultural medium for demonstration of knowledge. Halliday (1985), whose work is known for focusing on the relationship between language and social structure, states that there are three distinct components

of language: ‘ideational’, representing ideas about the world; ‘interpersonal’, facilitating interpersonal and social interactions and: ‘textual’, integrating ideas into substantive texts and relevant to the context. For Millennials, multimodality exemplifies the current ‘language’ of this generation signifying a social and cultural shift in the way which we communicate.

Strategy Implementation

The multimodal project strategy was implemented in a large lecture-based global consumer culture class. Students were randomly assigned to teams of 5 or 6, creating groups with varied majors, ages, and ethnic backgrounds. The assignment asked students to do the following: 1) based on the concepts discussed in class, define globalization in your own words, 2) based on this definition choose a topic that epitomizes globalization, 3) write a 3-5 page research paper supporting your topic and definition of globalization, 4) create a 5-8 minute documentary based on the research paper and 5) present your documentary to the class, answering 1 question from the instructor related to your topic. Within this multimodal project, students first understood the idea of globalization, formulated their own definition and applied that definition in a multimodal context (written, visually, and orally). During the design process, students had to make choices as to which ‘meaning making modes’ (e.g. font, color, sound, animation) to utilize to convey the intended message articulated in the paper. Through analysis of different textual documents, students were tasked to synthesize their findings using all three textual mediums to create a visual and oral representation of their written work.

Strategy Success and Plans for Continuation

Based on student feedback, revisions have been made to the project which have been implemented in both an Honors and online version of the course. Student grades revealed that on average scores were at least 20% higher on the multimodal project than on individual assignments supporting the idea that multimodal projects may resonate more with Millennial students. In the future, student feedback will be gathered to assess strategy effectiveness and comparison of scores between face to face, online and Honors classes.

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