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## Teaching A New Generation: The Differences Are Not Trivial

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As organizational behavior learners apply managerial knowledge in classroom exercises or in the field, the hidden knowledge they hold of the cultural context of these applications works spontaneously to create meaning. This contextual knowledge is developed profoundly in our formative years; thus tacit experiential knowledge differs by generation. Today's college-aged Millennials see organizational life and OB theory differently than yesterday's Gen X, or Baby Boomer cohorts. These differences are revealed in an exercise using the vintage (1982) and current editions of the board game *Trivial Pursuit*. This activity asks learners to find the presence of generationally-cultivated knowledge in their daily lives and consider its effect on their use of OB theory. The experiential exercise is also linked to field interviews and other activities related to understanding generational differences in world view.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Looking Inside Knowledge

In spite of our knowledge of cultural diversity, we mostly manage (and teach management concepts) as if everyone shared the same cultural assumptions about work and interpersonal behavior. This is understandable in that management education does not exist as a unique entity. It is, after all, yet another cultural artifact and representative of prevailing societal beliefs and assumptions.

This article proposes a learning exercise designed to elevate awareness of the nature and qualities of knowledge created in specific situations working and leading inside organizations. Within the boundaries of our courses, students produce pragmatic organizational knowledge for managerial practice, and well beyond. This sort of knowledge springs to mind in the course of action. It shapes and animates the *acts* of managerial behavior. Each act is composed of a case, a rule for action, and an expected result. Knowing and doing happen in the moment, on purpose, to bring successful resolution to disrupting circumstances. Rules for action come naturally with no guarantee of rightness. Management learners can integrate validated OB theories with knowledge that comes naturally to enact rules that bring better results (Cavaleri and Seivert, 2005). There is a moment when "inside" pragmatic organizational knowledge meets "outside" knowledge from books, acquired in schools, retrieved from computers or found in libraries. Once made aware of the interpenetration of theoretical and experiential knowledge as they apply OB concepts, learners practice with a more complete picture of why and how they know what works (Fearon and Cavaleri, 2005).

## Concepts and Context

Management learners turn to management educators for theoretical knowledge to improve their performance **in** organizations leading to the improved performance **of** organizations. However, what is actually put into practice is a unique and dynamic amalgam of outside knowledge with inside knowledge created as lessons of daily experience. There is an opportunity and responsibility of management educators to help learners recognize the significance of what Vaill (1996) calls the *real learnings of life* in using OB concepts as levers for knowledge enhancement.

What is it about knowledge that comes naturally? What difference does it make when trying out concepts in real and simulated cases of organizational disruption? People can act knowing the same formal theory with very different behaviors and outcomes. There is a tension produced when “inside” pragmatic organizational knowledge of experience meets “outside” knowledge acquired in schools, retrieved from computers or found in libraries. When students are helped to become aware of the tension they can apply OB concepts, learners practice with greater understanding.

The importance of cultivating deeper appreciation of pragmatic organizational knowledge is reinforced by Devenport and Prusak who introduce their book *Working Knowledge* by noting how practitioners search for “something basic, something irreducible and vital to performance, productivity, and innovation...as a result, the management community has come to realize that what an organization and its employees *know* is at the heart of how the organization functions.” (1998).

For those of us teaching Organizational Behavior, it is important to consider that the notion of shared cultural context is not intact. In fact, the basic assumptions our theories were built on may not be shared by our students. Concepts of leadership, motivation, etc. are not immutable; they change with experience and the social and/or technological drivers of culture.

Appreciating the lack of a completely shared cultural context also entails recognizing the bias we bring to our understanding of management ideas and seeing that our biases are often attributable to generational experience and “wisdom”.

This exercise is designed to sensitize learners to the existence of a reservoir of experiential knowledge constantly (but largely unconsciously) being filled by the prominent events of life as it happens day by day. The experiential knowledge is internalized as the working cultural context for the use of formal concepts taught in Organizational Behavior courses.

## Teaching the New Generation of Students

One of the great drivers of context is our generational understanding of “what is true” about any theory. Numerous authors have commented on the distinct characteristics of the cohort of current undergraduate students known as the millennial generation. (Raines, 2002, Kruse, 2004, Lancaster, 2002, Meisel and Fearon, 2006)

The names of the various generations are sometimes confused in common use but the usual typology suggests that “generational cohorts are groups of people, usually born in the same 20-year time span, who share common life experiences and thus share common attitudes and traits.” (Kruse, 2004)

In the USA alone, there are roughly 76 million children of baby boomers, born between 1978 and 2000, who are now filling colleges, the military, and various work places. Four generations are being asked to coexist at once: traditionalists (born before 1945), boomers (born 1946-1964), generation X (1965-1977), and Millennials (alternately known as echo boomers, “Gen-Net”, and even “generation why,” because they never stop questioning the status quo. (Sacks, 2006) The current generation of traditional age college students is known as Millennials or Generation Y (born from 1981 to the present day).

A short-hand reference for understanding some important differences is found in Lancaster and Stillman (2002). “Traditionalists believe in the chain of command. Baby boomers operate with their own command. Gen Xer’s are working towards a change of command and Millennials don’t command, they collaborate” (p.17).

It is also important to acknowledge that Millennials often enter their first full-time job with a fluid resume. Internships, co-ops and Summer-time experience have prepared them, and they expect to make an immediate impact.

Finally, technology has empowered this generation to build their unique reality of theory and learning. They define and are defined by the digital revolution. Therefore, their “intellectual authority” is extended but also limited to their information-seeking style and formats. This creates new ways of understanding what their texts and teachers might think of as traditional wisdom with some clash of assumptions:

“Peer respect has become more important than the power of hierarchical authority; relationships and trust returned to prominence after a long time in the wilderness; there were no longer any taboos about asking why things were the way they were, and challenging the status quo.

Today is their Sixties. And, in a vicarious way, ours too; The Age of the Individual.

These individuals are empowered and free from hierarchy, jealous about personal time, keen on relationships and trust, inquisitive about values and ethics, with the

power of the web to change their perceptions of time and distance and organizations and government” (Park, 2006).

Generation Y has grown up in a knowledge rich environment but the knowledge is often in the form of data rather than the wisdom of practice or thought. Simply, this means a lot of facts but not a lot of subtext. One of the principal characteristics of the knowledge age is virtualization, a process in which “[an] event is detached from a specific time and place, becomes public, and undergoes heterogenesis... the change that occurs as one shifts from traditional media to digital media, and the personal changes that occur to individuals as their thinking is increasingly shaped by digital media” (Lévy, 1998).

It is important to understand the power of virtualization for our traditional age college students. The act of detachment means that there is inevitably a “prying loose of objects and events from their original context”. This is ameliorated to a large extent by what Lévy calls “sharing.” That is, “the distribution of conceptual artifacts among communities interested in them” (p.74). The key aspect of this is that interest in the conceptual artifacts is not a given. We suggest that one of the important objectives of management education should be to develop and support curiosity about how others might differently understand similar concepts.

The following exercise adapts the still popular game of *Trivial Pursuit* to expose the generational imprint on a learner’s inside knowledge of the popular and prevailing culture in which they were raised. Such seemingly random bits of stored experiential knowledge mix with outside knowledge (in this instance, selected OB concepts) to produce new and sometimes surprising responses to managerial and organizational concepts.

The relative robustness of this supply of inside knowledge is revealed by the central devise of this exercise. Trivia questions are drawn from editions of the game which span twenty five years. The first round poses questions from circa 1982 – the first year of the master game. Second round questions come from the 2006 edition of the master version. For learners of traditional college age, round one tests their contextual knowledge of the popular culture of days before most were born. This is a palpably frustrating challenge to a member of today’s Millennial Generation. If there were members of Generation X or Baby Boomers in the room, they would experience recognition and the unmistakable joy of knowing. Turning the table, questions from a 2006 edition of the game would take those smiles off the faces of the “old timers” and put them on their youthful opponents.

Management learners are appropriately taught, in school and training settings, to see and shape organizational life with research-validated theories of organizational behavior. Yet, they and others in their organizations live by the consequences of pragmatic knowledge they produce as practice. This exercise suggests that students, faculty, and managers have different ways of knowing about their world. Obviously, this is potential ground for misunderstanding. If four generations have to continue to work together, it is necessary for all to understand how their concepts and theories of practice differ. However, if we can surface this difference and create awareness through humor and a simple classroom game, we can help people understand their differences. Perhaps, more importantly, we can teach with the increased authority that comes with better appreciating the unique quality of our students.

## Overview of the Exercise

This exercise adapts the 25 year old *Trivial Pursuit* board game to reveal to management learners the emergent nature of knowledge they have “soaked up” living in the context of the popular culture of their most formative days. Rules are modified so that teams have the fun of playing a shortened, highly interactive version of the game, while enacting the more serious purpose of uncovering concealed cultural knowledge and discuss who this infiltrates the meanings they make with formal OB concepts.

The original Master Game edition (introduced in 1982) draws its six categories of questions (Geography, Entertainment, History, Art & Literature, Science & Nature, and Sports & Leisure) from a culture extant before most of today’s traditional college-aged learners were alive. The first round is played using this vintage edition. Generally, teams of Millennial-aged learners do not progress far down the game board when quizzed on the popular culture of the 70’s and early 80’s. This would have been the formative time of their parents’ Generation X cohort.

A current version of the Master Game is used in the second round. Progress down the game board is markedly better. Why? Learners of the Millennial Generation tap into personal histories and a collective supply of tacit knowledge to achieve greater success in the game.

The third aspect of this exercise tests this inside-outside knowledge model and creates the link to current issues and concepts in the OB or Management course. It creates an experiment in how cultural knowledge mixes with standard OB concepts to consider its effect on meaning and application. A concept from whatever set is under study at the time is placed under consideration – for example, the equity theory of motivation.

J. Stacey Adam’s theory is that motivation is based on a person’s assessment of the ratio of outcomes or rewards (pay, status) received for what is done on the job compared with the same ratio for a fellow co-worker doing the same job (cited from Hitt, et al, *Organizational Behavior*, 2006, p.209). Students are asked to consider how ideas of fairness and justice might be differently described by each generation. Playing the different versions of the *Trivial Pursuit* games should heighten awareness that there might be generational differences in how we understand these ideas.

We might think that concepts like “motivation” and “equity” are fairly similar across time but this is not necessarily the case. Adams published his theory in 1965 and there have been significant changes in how we perceive fair employment practice since that time. Generation X workers are less likely than their parents to believe in the possibility of life-time employment with one firm. Organizational loyalty is mitigated by some cynicism about the psychological contract between employers and workers at all levels (Johnson, 2005) and the idea of fair treatment has also changed as people accept lay-offs, migration of jobs to other countries, and the realities of a contingent workforce. It is

limiting to suggest that perceived equity can be understood only in terms of the specific inputs and outcomes of a work relationship. Carrell and Dittrich (1978) made this point almost 20 years ago in pointing out that equity is also influenced by our beliefs in the overarching system that determines those inputs and outputs. If we see the compensation system as unfair we are hardly likely to find it equitable.

To drill a little deeper into this example of how concepts might change, it is worth noting that the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that as of 2005, almost 11% of the U.S. work force at all levels are “contingent workers.” That is, they “do not expect their current job to last.”

Today’s generation of students might find the current system of compensation and benefits fair but define “fairness” in a different way than previous generations. For this reason, it is useful and interesting to ask students to find out how their expectations of equity, leadership, and other organizational concepts may differ from those of older workers.

## **THE CLASSROOM EXERCISE**

### **Preparation:**

1. The instructor should give a brief explanation of the nature of knowledge formed gradually in response to vivid, socially reinforced, events of daily living. That is, we understand reality based on what we have experienced.
2. Organize class teams (5-8 members) to play the Game.
3. Timing: 50- 75 minutes. In the 50 minute time period, the Instructor should plan for some de-briefing to carry over into the next class period. The longer time (75 minutes) will allow completion of the exercise within one class.
4. Equipment:
  - a) A room with movable furniture to accommodate group work
  - b) Two versions of the board game Trivial Pursuit. The original 1982 Genus version and one of the current versions (either “Volume 6 for Adults” or “Millennium”).
  - c) Document camera and screen to project the game board.

### **Running the Exercise:**

1. Round One.
  - a. Use a vintage version of Trivial Pursuit. “The Master Game – Genus Edition” is recommended. (It can be found in many closets or on-line at: EBay or Amazon.com. *OMJ* readers can also contact the authors for a list of questions or see one of trivia web sites mentioned below.)
  - d) Organize the room so that teams may see the game board. (The optimal arrangement is to project onto a screen with a document camera).
  - e) Each team has a game piece representing them on the board in the starting position indicated in the Rules of Play.

- f) A member of each team throws the dice in turn. The category upon which the game piece lands determines the question asked by the instructor (or game leader). Note: Q&A cards can be pre-sorted for cultural content or selected from the box at random).
  - g) The team huddles and a designee gives the answer, if they have one. If it is correct, the team rolls the dice for another turn. If incorrect, the dice move to the next team in order.
  - h) Game rules are modified for the exercise to conserve time.
    - i. To win the round, a team must be the first to fill in each category on their game piece with a token by the color of the category.
    - ii. Wrong answers to a category already filled, mean the token must be removed and not replaced, until a turn allows a chance for the next correct answer.
    - iii. Keep playing, until a team wins.
    - iv. Playing time can be limited in advance, so that the team with the most tokens when time is called can win.
    - v. Debrief to surface knowledge context issue. A sample question to do this is: **What does this experience reveal about knowledge that you can or cannot access on demand?**
2. Round Two
- a. Use current edition of Trivial Pursuit. (Volume 6 is the suggested edition.)
  - b. Repeat the way Round One was played.
  - c. Debrief by comparing the quality of answering in Round Two with Round One. The strains, silences, and incorrect guesses of Round One indicate lack of cultural knowledge of their parents' Day. The ease of answering contemporary trivia questions reflects the knowledge common to their generation. How do these previously hidden recollections influence and condition their use of standard OB theories? This is addressed in Round Three.
3. Round Three – Link to Concepts
- a. Ask learners to select a key term from a recent reading assignment. For example, a chapter on motivation will most likely contain the concept of equity theory. Ask the teams to agree upon the meaning of this theory and how they are likely to use the concept to mediate or manage interpersonal disputes over inequities.
  - b. Give them a simple critical incident for applying equity theory. (E.g. Two students believe the other is earning a better grade because one got more attention and recognition from the instructor.)
  - c. Charge teams with answering this question: *How is my attitude toward this aspect of organizational behavior framed by my contextual knowledge of the theory?*
  - d. Ask the teams to test how they would address this situation in the context of what comes to mind in each of the six categories. They can remind themselves of the nature of each of the six categories by running through some of the trivia questions. Some categories may surface richer contextual knowledge in this case than others. For example, tapping



- Geography could elevate the possibility that the two students in the critical incident question above might well come from very different national or cultural backgrounds. Or, Sports & Leisure questions might produce the insight that there is no such thing as a level playing field these days. Which has more bearing on a resolution to the case question about equity is something for them to discover.
- e. Debrief by having teams report out on “if and how” seemingly trivial knowledge pre-disposes a problem-solver to use OB theory differently than its literal form. Follow with the broader question: *Might people whose cultural knowledge is rooted in the Round One generation use this concept differently to resolve this situation? If so, how so? If not, why not?*
4. The Field Research Follow-Up: This assignment extends the learning of the exercise beyond the classroom and develops skills in interviewing as well as deeper understanding of the generational differences in theory sense-making.
    - a. Have students choose a topic (leadership, motivation, etc.) and write a paragraph about what this topic means to them in terms of definition and application to work.
    - b. Students then conduct brief interviews with someone from Gen X or the Boomer Generation on that subject. The assignment is to:
      - i. Ask for the interview subject’s definition of the same topic.
      - ii. Find out how this is applied in the interview subject’s work experience.
      - iii. Students then meet in topic groups in class to compare answers; get a sense of differences in concepts, definitions, etc.; and report out to the class on their findings. A summary paper from each group is a useful group deliverable for this exercise.

### Variations of the Exercise

1. The Generational Test
  - a. The same trivial pursuit of management context can be repeated with MBA students (especially the part/time student population) who are generally aged 27 – 35 and at least part of a generation removed from our current undergraduate Millennial Generation students. This age group is the trailing edge of Generation X and also represents the people who are likely to be the direct supervisors of the entry-level managers (our current undergraduates) in a year or two.
  - b. The questions about theory building and context can be repeated with this group with the same task: *Consider how people whose cultural knowledge is rooted in the Round Two generation use this concept differently to resolve this situation? If so, how so? If not, why not?*
2. Testing for Other Differences
  - a. If age of participants is relatively constant (e.g. a classroom of all 18-20 year olds), the Volume 6 Edition can be used with teams divided by gender, by academic major, by regions of the country, or any other

reasonable demographic that significantly impacts the accumulation of “inside knowledge.”

3. Using the exercise without the Trivial Pursuit game.
  - a. Any list of generationally sensitive trivia questions can serve the same purpose in a “low tech” version of this exercise. Questions (and answers) are available from several web sites (e.g. <http://www.triviaplaying.com/index.htm>; or [http://www.businessballs.com/quizballs/quizballs\\_free\\_trivia\\_quiz\\_questions\\_answers.htm](http://www.businessballs.com/quizballs/quizballs_free_trivia_quiz_questions_answers.htm) ).
  - b. Create lists of questions on PowerPoint slides with fade-in answers and run a simple team competition as an effective method of using trivia to elicit the same contextual understanding about knowledge.
  - c. Using the game and Copyright issues
    - i. Facts cannot be copyrighted, but the expression of facts is subject to copyright laws. The Trivial Pursuit questions are all under copyright of TRIVIAL PURSUIT® as well as the distinctive design of the game board and game cards are trademarks of Horn Abbot Ltd. and Horn Abbot International Ltd. for the games distributed and sold worldwide under exclusive license to Hasbro, Inc. ©1999 Horn Abbot Ltd. and ©1999 Horn Abbot International Ltd.
    - ii. The Fair Use application of the copyright laws allows us to use the game in a classroom setting but we are not allowed to simply take the trivia questions **in the game’s format** under any circumstances without permission. However, we may legally re-write the questions substantially (e.g. as an alphabetical list of questions separate from the game categories).

## **SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR OB INSTRUCTORS AND OB LEARNERS**

### **For the Instructor**

1. There are clear implications for teaching strategies from this exercise.
  - a. We should constantly test our assumptions of what students know and do not know about Management, the world of work, and how individual responses to the same situation might vary with age and work experience.
  - b. We should spend some time explaining the backgrounds of the various theories we teach so that today’s students understand that a theory devised with factory work in mind or a single cultural reference may seem strange when they are thinking of work in a digital and multi-cultural environment.
  - c. We can use specific questions to debrief the exercise that allow students to consider the results through a variety of lens and frames. The following question was used by the authors and elicited the student answers below:

Q: Some of you could answer some of these trivia questions but no one could answer all of them. Why not? What does this teach us about knowledge when you need it?

A: “I was surprised what the MBA students knew compared to our class groups. They have a real advantage in this game and it I think that they might have an advantage in figuring out problems at work too.” *From a traditional age undergraduate student*

A: “The kids in the undergrad classes know so much stuff about popular culture, electronics, and other things that seem like just entertainment. But...when we were trying to answer the game questions they suddenly looked a lot more competent than I gave them credit for. Made me think that they know a lot of things that I should be finding out about. I just don't know how to get this information out without sounding stupid or patronizing.”  
*From an MBA student in her mid-thirties*

A: “This teaches us that we do know things, but don't ever realize it. There were many hard questions that no one had a clue what the answer were. We always do the “A HA” when we realize what the answer is. We have so much knowledge that a lot of it is all in our brains under some cobwebs. We have to learn to listen to everything because you never know if you will ever use it.” *From a traditional age undergraduate student.*

- d. We should encourage students to surface their skepticism or confusion about theories and behaviors that do not seem to fit their notions of common sense management. This reluctance to embrace a classroom or textbook “truth” might reasonably be interpreted to be an artifact of generational differences.
- e. One way to encourage constructive skeptical thinking is to build assignments that ask students to challenge theories that may seem to lack logical validity. That is, the extent to which a measure represents all facets of a given social concept. A simple essay-type test question for this can phrased as: “If there is something about this theory that does not make sense to you, please discuss this and state the areas in which the theory seems to fail the test of simple logic. Along with your answer, please write a few comments about why this theory was included in the text if it has such an obvious failing.”
- f. When working with graduate students, executive learners, or even undergraduates who are not in the traditional age group, it makes sense to ask them to also consider generational differences. They will be hiring,

supervising, doing performance appraisals for people whose basic assumptions, knowledge base, and understanding of the world may differ significantly from their own.

### For the OB Learner

1. There are some important implications in this exercise for how you understand the theories and concepts of your course.
  - a. It is important to know that the theories being taught were developed by people with different life experiences than your own. In some cases, this means living in a pre-digital time without access to the internet, computers, and in a work world where manufacturing was the dominant industry. Many ideas that are still useful may seem strange because of this history.
  - b. Just because the ideas seem out of date, does not mean they are not useful and important. The music you listen to on your mp3 player has its roots in rock and blues dating back more than 50 years. It is built on a tradition and management theories are much the same in that regard.
  - c. To succeed in business, you need to think about how your ideas and behavior are being perceived by your managers and senior executives who have much different life experiences and knowledge than yours. For example, an obvious communication method such as texting or blogs may not occur to your boss. However, the reality of work is that you have the responsibility to demonstrate why your ideas may be the best in a particular situation.
  - d. For some students who are older than traditional undergraduates or executive learners, you may find yourselves being supervised by members of this new generation. In this case, the cognitive and adaptive skills of the older generation will become even more crucial to organizational success. That is, you need to find ways to reduce the blank spots in your communication with the Millennial generation. Just as in any communication or professional relationship, it is important to test your assumptions of what is being said and what someone wants from you. As we have seen in the exercise, everyone knows things just not always the same things.

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