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Abstract

Encouraging students to actively engage with course material is an ongoing challenge for many management educators. One common tactic is to use various technologies that allow tech-savvy Millennial Generation students to take a more active role in their learning. In this article, we describe an innovative group project that challenges students to integrate Xtranormal (text-to-video software) into a role-play exercise. This project was incorporated into undergraduate human resource management courses at two universities. Qualitative self-report student learning data were collected over the course of three semesters from 210 students. The data offer insights into why and how this project excited the students and positively affected their perceptions about designing and evaluating a training session, applying training concepts, and demonstrating other human resource management concepts. We found that providing students an opportunity to use Xtranormal resulted in a number of learning outcomes, including creative freedom that enhanced engagement with the material, greater understanding and application of concepts, and training method and design competency, among others.

Keywords

technology, Xtranormal, Millennials, Generation Y, role-play, experiential learning, student-centered learning

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As instructors of introductory courses in human resource management (HRM), we have used a variety of learning activities in a training role-play group project intended to accomplish a number of learning objectives. In the past, we assigned this project where students would typically conduct group presentations using popular software such as PowerPoint or Keynote, write and present case studies where the rest of the class would develop alternatives and recommendations for their cases, and develop and implement various role-plays. While the feedback from students was usually positive about these learning activities, students reported that they were looking for something fresh and new that had not been done in most other courses.

Thus, we began to reflect on how we could redesign the group project that would result in an impactful, transformational student learning experience. Quite by chance, we saw a video on youtube.com that depicted a frustrated English professor advising a persistent student seeking a recommendation for admission into a doctoral program (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obTNwPJvOI8>). While the hilarity of this video undoubtedly caught our attention and that of other educators (Parry, 2011), it was not until we began to look further into creating and presenting such cartoons did we realize its possible significance as a teaching tool to help achieve the learning objectives for the training role-play group project.

The authors of the aforementioned video used text-to-video software called Xtranormal™.¹ This software allows users to produce and edit their own short cartoon movies. Users draft a script (text) for avatars (i.e., lifelike characters) to act out in a monologue or dialogue with customizable backgrounds to reflect workplaces, outdoors, or even shopping malls. A more detailed account of how to use Xtranormal and the potential for use in the classroom will be discussed later on. Suffice it to say, we were struck by the potential of Xtranormal to engage our students and facilitate new avenues of interaction via a web, desktop, and mobile device software that emphasized experiential learning and humor. The advent of Web 2.0 (e.g., video sharing, social networking, and mobile computing) and the perceived technical savvy of today's postsecondary students (Gerard, 2012; McHaney, 2011; Worley, 2011) have led management educators to experiment with new forms of technology to engage their students (Prosperio & Gioia, 2007). We too began to brainstorm its potential in terms of how students might apply what they have learned in our HRM courses to create their own short animated movies for the group project. Could this seemingly juvenile video software engage a generation of students by allowing them to script their own short cartoon movies thereby effectively achieving the project's specific learning objectives?

Indeed, we found that Xtranormal contributes to the creation of a powerful learning environment (De Corte, Verschaffel, Entwistle, & van Merriënboer,

2003; Gerjets & Hesse, 2004; Simons, van der Linden, & Duffy, 2000) such that it inspires students within a collaborative context to take ownership in their journey of understanding and applying concepts. We designed four learning objectives using a revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) to incorporate both the knowledge and cognitive process dimensions of learning:

1. Design and evaluate a mock training for a new-hire orientation
2. Apply more than one training method and design that focus on the principles of adult learning and evaluation
3. Demonstrate an in-depth understanding of a specific HRM topic of the students' choosing relevant to the training content
4. Provide points of analysis for the participating new-hires associated with the chosen HRM topic to support their understanding of the content being trained

The experiential nature of Xtranormal facilitates achieving our learning objectives by removing the emphasis on rote learning that traditionally involves "digesting and memorizing decontextualized and fragmented knowledge elements and procedural skills that are transmitted by a teacher or by some other instructional media like a textbook" (Gerjets & Hesse, 2004, p. 447). The goal of this article is not only to expose instructors to this evolving technology but to also explain how and why Xtranormal enhances our students' higher order thinking skills such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). To this effort we introduce a teaching innovation that is a new take on how professors can revitalize group projects. We present an interactive group exercise that combines Xtranormal with an HRM training role-play, thus empowering students to take a more hands-on role in their learning experiences.

In the paragraphs that follow, we will frame Xtranormal as an innovative teaching and learning tool by applying the Instructional Systems Design (ISD) model of training and development (Saks & Haccoun, 2010), which consists of a needs analysis, design and delivery, and evaluation. First, our needs analysis will compare relevant literature on the characteristics of the Millennial Generation with relevant aspects of Xtranormal functionality to underscore the relevance of this new technology. Second, as part of design and delivery, we will detail how and why this software was incorporated into a semester-long project in our respective HRM courses at two different universities during three consecutive semesters. Last, to apply the final step in the ISD model, we will evaluate Xtranormal based on a qualitative analysis of students' learning experiences. We will conclude by discussing the

challenges, rewards, and opportunities of designing and implementing an Xtranormal exercise for teachers and students alike.

Appealing to the Millennial Generation

Cohen and Lippert (1999), along with Mundhenk (2004), advocate that we must understand our students' background, needs, and expectations when designing, implementing, and evaluating what Felder and Brent (1996) call "student-centered" teaching strategies. Utilizing the first component of the ISD model of training and development (Saks & Haccoun, 2010), we focused our needs analysis on our students' generational characteristics as it relates to the potential value and relevance of this software tool in the context this course. We recognized that students enter into our introduction to HRM course with a limited understanding of the various HRM functions, the strategic role of HRM, and the importance of the various HRM-related functions that support each other. That said, however, our undergraduate students who are labeled Millennials (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010), Generation Y (Wilson & Gerber, 2008), Net Generation (Tapscott, 1999, 2009), and Digital Natives (Prensky, 2001) are highly likely to embrace and use this technology in a meaningful way. It is our position that millennial students possess the necessary readiness for training by virtue of their familiarity with technology such as Xtranormal.

While there has been some variation in categorizing Millennials, we adopt the definition used by most scholars (e.g., Howe & Strauss, 2000; Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 2009; Wilson & Gerber, 2008) that this group of students was born between the early 1980s and early 2000s. While a comprehensive discussion of all aspects of the literature on Millennials² is outside the scope of this article, our review of this extant literature uncovered two consistent themes that are relevant to the goals of this article. First, Millennials are very technologically savvy (e.g., Deal et al., 2010; Kellogg School of Management, 2010; Lyons, Duxbury, & Higgins, 2007; Tapscott, 2009) and open to learning new technologies (McHaney, 2011). Junco and Mastrodicasa (2007) have noted that this is the first generation that has lived their entire lives with computers and a host of other technological advances including instant messaging, MP3 players, and mobile devices. Likely stemming from their nearly ubiquitous access to the Internet and their prolific use of online technology, Millennials have become proficient at expressing themselves and interacting online. Nearly two thirds (64%) of online adolescents have authored some form of original content with the manufacture of Web pages, artwork, photos, stories, videos, and audio recordings accounting for the most common of these creations (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007).

The second consistent theme in the literature is the characterization of Millennials as team-oriented and cooperative (Ford, 2007; Lippincott, 2010; Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010; Werth & Werth, 2011; Wilson & Gerber, 2008; Worley, 2011). This has resulted in a great deal of literature focusing on how Millennials prefer to learn and how instructors should focus on a more student-centric learning approach (Mundhenk, 2004; Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005; Werth & Werth, 2011; Worley, 2011). Millennials are seen as preferring experiential learning experiences where they are creating content and are active participants in the learning process (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Valtonen, Dillon, Hacklin, & Vaisanen, 2010). Worley (2011) advances the argument that group projects play to Millennial strengths as being extremely social and team-oriented learners.

It is important to point out that the study of Millennials has raised the concern of not overgeneralizing or stereotyping an entire generation (Jones & Healing, 2010; Valtonen et al., 2010). Thus, it is not our intent to assume that all Millennials are technologically savvy or group-oriented; however, we would submit it is useful to recognize that there may be general characteristics that most Millennials share and that understanding the values and preferences of this generation can be helpful to educators seeking to create a learner-centric environment (Werth & Werth, 2011). As Levine and Dean (2012) aptly noted in their recent work, “This is the first generation of digital natives to attend college . . . and the launch of the World Wide Web [was] a key event in their lives” (p. 20).

Transforming Millennials From Consumers to Producers of Online Content

With an understanding of the Millennials and their preferences for learning, we turn our attention to how Xtranormal may create an impactful learning experience for this generation of students. According to Valtonen et al. (2010), social software, such as Xtranormal, broadens the role of the user by allowing them to transition from consuming web content to being active creators of web content. These opportunities to express oneself allow Millennials to personalize their learning (Valtonen et al., 2010). Prosperio and Gioia (2007) characterize Millennials as valuing interactive virtual learning. Given that our students “expect rich, interactive and even ‘playful’ learning environments” (Prosperio & Gioia, 2007, p. 73), we approached Xtranormal with an open mind. After experimenting with the software we quickly realized that it was indeed fun, easy to use, and visually appealing.



Figure 1. Primary user control panel.

Users have the option not only to choose avatars that reflect themselves based on race, ethnicity, gender, age, and physical stature, but also to select pop-culture icons or fictional characters (e.g., aliens, robots, monsters, politicians, and alike). The gestures, both physical and verbal, can be manipulated using a variety of features (camera angles, zooming, arm/body movements, pauses in speech, facial adjustments, and language preference) to add a sense of realism to character affect. Recent changes to Xtranormal have enhanced the lifelike interaction of the characters. For example, one of our students recently discovered that users are able to now record and assign their own voiceover to the avatar characters. This enhances user power and offers even greater personalization. All editing occurs in a control panel (see Figures 1 and 2) where users can make multiple decisions about script, character gesturing, voice, and background. Basic levels of computer knowledge and skill are required to develop and manipulate the characters. With the click of a mouse (or swipe of a screen on mobile devices), users have broad creative control.

Basic membership is free and permits monologue and dialogue development using a host of characters and backgrounds and conveniently permits users to have unlimited access to edit and view their videos. In addition, they introduced an application that can be used offline that offers even more



Figure 2. Text-to-video controls.

enhanced features, which is available to all users. Tutorial resources and additional information related to developing, editing, and publishing Xtranormal videos are provided in Appendix A.

As instructors, we recognized the potential of Xtranormal to be used in a variety of ways including as a substitute to a traditional role-play exercise, a student-developed case study, or even a take-home team assignment employing this technology. Based on our preliminary findings, Xtranormal provides students with rich opportunities for active learning and theory application

central to the project's core learning objectives. A more detailed discussion of the evidence of student learning will be presented later in the paper. While we agree with Blair and Hartman (2010) that Xtranormal can be used as a new way for students and instructors to communicate in online courses especially (i.e., creating characters who discuss issues pertaining to the course and posting them for others to view and respond), we see Xtranormal as a tool to enhance students' knowledge, skills, and abilities as it pertains to course content and application. As Tapscott (1999, 2009) encourages, we must let our Millennials customize their learning experience so they can better relate to the material and establish ownership. Xtranormal allows students to do that by putting them in the director's chair.

Integrating Xtranormal Into an HRM Training Role-Play Group Project

In accordance with the ISD model (Saks & Haccoun, 2010), it was our desire to design and deliver a learning experience that capitalized on students' propensity for teamwork and proficiency with technology. It is our responsibility as instructors to offer clear learning objectives (as previously noted in the introduction) and clear expectations of what is required of them for this project. The Xtranormal project gives students the opportunity to apply the key principles and concepts of effective training (Learning Objectives 1 and 2) and master a key HRM concept or function (Learning Objectives 3 and 4). The semester-long project is detailed with step-by-step directions in Appendix B, but it is important to explain aspects of the assignment and our rationale for its design and implementation. In summary, we asked student teams to develop a 20-minute training session that incorporated short, yet relevant Xtranormal videos. The project was assigned at the start of the semester and asked them to engage in a role-play as HRM trainers for a large hospital system responsible for designing and delivering a new-hire orientation. In accordance with the learning objectives outlined in the introduction, students had complete discretion as to the training content and delivery for the session, including the specific topics addressed by the Xtranormal video and how they chose to implement the training (e.g., examining which methods could best accompany Xtranormal in an effective manner to train the content). They were only restricted by certain realistic variables including time and space limitations, technology, and the hospital context. Therefore, students needed to carefully consider their audience and how they could deliver a quality training session.

The purpose of the role-play was to let students dig deep into their chosen content areas (Learning Objectives 3 and 4) and practice the role of a trainer (Learning Objectives 1 and 2). This project, therefore, gave them the freedom

to improvise and express their ideas, knowledge, and skills in an interactive setting whereby the trainers and students could learn from each other (Boggs, Mickel, & Brooks, 2007). It also provided them an opportunity to systematically reflect on the relevant training dynamics inherent to their design and implementation choices. Following their training sessions, teams submitted a written memo to the instructor that addressed questions related to participant readiness, training effectiveness, benefits and limitations of Xtranormal as a video case method, and other activities or methods that could have enhanced the effectiveness of the training.

In essence, this project allowed Xtranormal to complement role-play by letting students use the videos as a way to showcase exemplary or dysfunctional problems in the organization through character interaction and storylines. Those videos became cases for the trainers, in their role, to discuss and use to educate their new-hires. For example, a student team developed a video depicting examples of sexual harassment and discrimination. They then used it as a point of discussion to quiz training participants on hospital policy and existing laws pertaining to the topic. A different team devoted the new-hire orientation to training participants on the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 as it relates to patient privacy. They developed a series of very creative and amusing Xtranormal videos depicting various examples of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 violations by avatar nurses and doctors in a hospital setting (a sample video from this group's training is available on YouTube: <http://youtu.be/iJ3o0Egbwkg>). While the group communicated the seriousness of the topic and implications for the hospital and patient, the cartoon characters provided a balance of realism and humor. Both teams were able to use their videos as cases to test knowledge and stimulate discussion in an interactive format with the new-hires.

Furthermore, in line with recent research (Ho, Rappa, & Cheeb, 2009; Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Werth & Werth, 2011), software technology similar to Xtranormal can be leveraged as a new type of role-play that takes on the flavor of a simulation. For example, a team of trainers designed a video that depicted avatars in their physical image and actual voices to act out scenarios pertaining to labor relations. The fictitious audience for the new-hire orientation was senior nurse managers and operations staff. Participants were shown videos of the trainers acting out, through their avatar characters, a collective bargaining negotiation. The avatars then posed questions to the audience about the specific scenes. The team members designed their training to let the avatars ask questions, but then transitioned to the role of facilitator during a debrief about the storylines depicted in the videos. This was a creative attempt by the students to develop a video case, but to also infuse some simulated action using their own avatars.

Method to Assess Student Learning

The final step in the ISD model is evaluation (Saks & Haccoun, 2010). Did this Xtranormal assignment really improve our students' understanding of the material and HRM skills to achieve our aforementioned learning objectives? To evaluate the effectiveness of integrating Xtranormal into this group project, we developed an open-ended, anonymous questionnaire focused not on whether students "liked" Xtranormal but on narratives describing their learning experiences (Schmidt-Wilk, 2010). The questions are included in Appendix C. We assessed 210 undergraduate students' learning enrolled in six introductory HRM courses at both authors' respective universities. We used the aforementioned assignment during three consecutive semesters and evaluated students' responses on completion of the training sessions. Students completed a paper copy of the six-item questionnaire and submitted it without identifiers in a sealed envelope to a third party administrative assistant. Based on information provided by our course management systems, we discovered that all students were members of the Millennial Generation (ages ranged from 20 to 28).

We interpreted the findings using a systematic, iterative coding technique that let us identify thematic trends in the data (Conklin, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Patterned relationships among students' responses were categorized around certain themes that emerged from both memoing and diagramming textural descriptions (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). We individually analyzed the completed questionnaires and then shared our initial coding to examine commonalities in the themes. By comparing and contrasting our respective analyses, we were able to determine that our inferences were indeed justified (Bryman, 2001) and could therefore ensure confirmability and dependability in findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Evidence of Xtranormal Student Learning

The results were organized based on a final categorizing and coding of the assessment data. In this section, we will describe the positive effects that integrating Xtranormal with the training role-play project has on student perceptions about their learning. We found six unique learning outcomes that satisfied the primary learning objectives related to HRM knowledge acquisition, demonstration, and application (see Table 1).

Learning Outcome 1: Enhanced Creative Freedom Promoted Greater Engagement With Course Material

Management educators have shifted from focusing on rote learning to a preference for classroom exercises and activities that support active learning.

Table 1. Learning Outcomes and Achieved Learning Objectives.

Student learning outcomes (SLO)	Achieved learning objectives
SLO 1: Enhanced creative freedom promoted greater engagement with course material	Objective 1: Design and evaluate a mock training for a new-hire orientation Objective 3: Demonstrate an in-depth understanding of a specific HRM topic of the students' choosing relevant to the training content
SLO 2: In-depth learning and preparation for deliverable	Objective 3: Demonstrate an in-depth understanding of a specific HRM topic of the students' choosing relevant to the training content
SLO 3: Nuanced visual and audio effects provides for improved project quality	Objective 1: Design and evaluate a mock training for a new-hire orientation Objective 2: Apply more than one training method and design that focus on the principles of adult learning and evaluation
SLO 4: Training method and design competency	Objective 1: Design and evaluate a mock training for a new-hire orientation Objective 2: Apply more than one training method and design that focus on the principles of adult learning and evaluation
SLO 5: Greater understanding of HRM concepts and application	Objective 3: Demonstrate an in-depth understanding of a specific HRM topic of the students' choosing relevant to the training content Objective 4: Provide points of analysis for the participating new-hires associated with the chosen HRM topic to support their understanding of the content being trained
SLO 6: Reflection on the integration of HRM concepts	Objective 1: Design and evaluate a mock training for a new-hire orientation Objective 3: Demonstrate an in-depth understanding of a specific HRM topic of the students' choosing relevant to the training content Objective 4: Provide points of analysis for the participating new-hires associated with the chosen HRM topic to support their understanding of the content being trained

Note. HRM = human resource management.

Feedback from the students suggests that they enjoyed the discretion to bring HRM-related themes to life in a creative and lively manner. By giving students this creative freedom, they retained the information better than in other courses where a more passive role was expected by their instructors. For instance, one student revealed that such discretion encouraged greater engagement with both the material and software.

We were able to show with the video the issues in a way that was realistic and relatable to other students in our training session. Letting us pick the topic was cool because we could bring back to ideas learned earlier in the semester, especially when we wrote the memo. But, I guess the greatest benefit as that I could demonstrate real life examples or situations and this specifically greatly benefits me as I am not the greatest actor but find myself to be creative in coming up with storylines. So this was a lot easier for me, implementing the story through these “characters” than actually physically acting it out.

Learning Outcome 2: In-Depth Learning and Preparation for Deliverable

As underscored in Learning Objective 3, we sought to create an environment that emphasized the synthesis of various course concepts in a meaningful manner so that students can go beyond a superficial understanding and explore a topic in an in-depth way. The next generation of HRM professionals must be able to think strategically and proactively, have a strong understanding of the impact of laws and demographics on the workplace, and be able to juggle multiple priorities (Zinni, Mathis, & Jackson, 2011). Therefore, it makes sense to script HRM-related interactions using the creative tools embedded in Xtranormal. Students were encouraged to develop this in-depth learning and macro-level thinking about various HRM topics when they had the time to become familiar with the core concepts and reflect over time. The following evidence supports our semester-long approach and showcases how students were able to successfully demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of HRM concepts.

It is totally more appropriate as a semester long project, this gave me and my team the background needed to choose from a variety of HR management concepts . . . and then time to create and edit the video exactly how we wanted it. A lot of time was spent preparing, but it was worth it, so we needed the semester. Plus, we could take what some of us experienced in our own jobs, or what our friends or parents have gone through, to use for the videos. Due to the time consumption of actually writing the script and designing the video scenes and characters, I can't imagine doing this as an in-class or shorter assignment. It would have been too stressful otherwise.

Learning Outcome 3: Nuanced Visual and Audio Effects Provides for Improved Project Quality

Students revealed that once they mastered the software there was a great deal more that they could do to improve their training using its visual and audio effects. They were often able to leverage the technology to produce videos that were creative and humorous. These nuances also allowed the teams who exercised effective time management to explore the subtleties of the technology and produce a polished, professional project. The following student feedback is representative of the responses we received about the enhanced project quality:

It wasn't that difficult but it would have been easier when adding the motion if we hadn't recorded the lines because it was hard to get certain gestures to match up with certain phrases. We had to use a number of pauses to make the speech understandable, but the fact that we could do that to make the characters sound real was helpful. We were also forgetting to change the camera angle or finding an appropriate sound or hand gestures, but once we found the different options it helped big time to make it more believable.

Learning Outcome 4: Training Method and Design Competency

One of the challenges for instructors in an introduction to HRM course is theory application in context. This is certainly true when trying to teach students about the four steps of a training model (i.e., needs analysis, design, delivery, and evaluation) and encourage them to think about the salient issues when designing a training program (e.g., different trainee learning styles). This exercise allowed students to struggle with the various aspects of training design (who to train, what to train, and how to train) and put these design issues into action. The software lends itself to the trial and error nature that all students struggle with when designing training. The students saw Xtranormal as one of many possible ways of bringing training to life and offer trainees something they had not seen in previous training sessions. The enthusiasm about applying the training model as a result of the exercise emerged in the data. One student reflected,

I had never thought about how much went into training. I loved evaluating the various training methods and seeing them put into action in front of a live audience. We were constantly aware that we had to present a lot of information but knew that people would learn better interactively and the videos let us do that. We not only had to learn the information but also be able to train others who don't know what we are teaching them.

Learning Outcome 5: Greater Understanding of HRM Concepts and Application

One of the other challenges for instructors of HRM courses is building enthusiasm for the field given many misconceptions about the profession as popularized in cartoon strips such as *Dilbert* (i.e., Catbert the evil HR director) or the television show *The Office*. Incorporating Xtranormal into their learning lets students bring HRM concepts to life. The responses indicate that students' shared belief that their understanding of these HRM concepts improved as a result of this exercise.

The process of making the movie made me more aware of the issue I was trying to convey. It also helped us apply what we had already learned. We had to take theories and turn them into real-life situations for training and video. Pulling from our readings and stuff we learned in class let us build the video and design our training so classmates could understand what we were saying. When we were in teams, reading about and discussing the ideas was one way to learn, but then when we did the training it was a fun and entertaining way to reinforce the concepts not just for the students but also us. It really allowed me to see the concepts play out in a work setting as opposed to just learning them from the book. I really found it was a unique way to demonstrate the topic so that it was realistic and relatable to students undergoing the labor-management negotiation or arbitration hearing.

Learning Outcome 6: Reflection on the Integration of HRM Concepts

As management educators know, it is important that students not see each topic in their course as a separate and discrete concept but to understand how the concepts fit together and mutually reinforce each other. HRM is no exception to the issue of trying to get students to "see the big picture" in terms of how the various concepts reinforce each other (e.g., compensation, selection, training, performance management) and how they practically support or harm overall organizational effectiveness. This exercise teaches the students how the pieces of the HRM puzzle fit together. The data revealed that it produced higher order macro-level thinking about HRM in the modern organization. One student stated, "I think we used information gained all semester throughout the project. And it let me learn about some more material to include that I probably missed from the readings earlier this semester." This underscores shared student perceptions about being able to understand HRM in more depth.

Contributions

Management educators seek to provide a powerful learning environment to enhance the student experience (De Corte et al., 2003; Gerjets & Hesse, 2004; Simons et al., 2000). Current literature finds that Millennials are conversant with technology and are active creators of technology through various Web 2.0 platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Therefore, our article makes three unique contributions to management education literature and the broader scholarship of teaching and learning. First, to our knowledge, no other peer-reviewed article has focused on the relevance and impact of Xtranormal in the postsecondary setting. Our findings reveal the strengths of this approach because it focuses on providing an active learning experience, reinforces macro-level thinking about the course material, and leverages the attributes of Millennial learners who are team-oriented and active users of technology.

Second, our work adds to the growing body of literature on the impact of technology on learning activities (e.g., Arbaugh, 2008). Our work details the experiences of Millennial students who self-reported several positive learning outcomes as a result of their experience with Xtranormal integrated into an HRM training role-play project. Specifically related to social software and its impact on learning, our article also contributes to the growing literature (Valtonen et al., 2010). Our findings are consistent with others (Cress & Kimmerle, 2008; Mazman & Usleul, 2010) who found that wiki-environments and social networking tools “foster students’ communication and collaboration” (Valtonen et al., 2010, p. 213).

Last, we illustrate how the Xtranormal group project helps to foster engagement “where learners see themselves as active participants in their own development where learning is constructed and discovered instead of dictated by the teacher” (Werth & Werth, 2011, p. 14). Furthermore, technology such as Xtranormal provides Millennials with a level of interactivity that Werth and Werth (2011) claim this generation desires. Our findings support existing models of student-centered learning that advocate enhancing opportunities for creativity, independence, reflection, and ownership. Using Xtranormal, however, offers a less intimidating learning experience for introverted students or even international students who are still acclimating to the new environment and expectations (and may have language barriers). Another advantage of the software and design of this group exercise is that it allows all students to participate in the development of the storyline, script, and critical events within the interpersonal interaction on their own time and in their own terms.

Concluding Remarks: Caveats and Possible Adaptations

Xtranormal integrated with the aforementioned group project resulted in a number of positive learning outcomes and our findings further contribute to management education scholarship. However, there are limitations to the technology and project for instructors to consider, along with opportunities to use Xtranormal beyond this specific HRM group project.

One important limitation to consider is the Xtranormal pricing model. Halfway through one semester, we learned that Xtranormal changed its pricing and began charging for certain advanced features that had previously been free of charge. Xtranormal initially offered their product at no cost, which was very appealing to both our students and us, but they soon introduced various fee-based functionalities. We chose to use the free basic features to demonstrate and assign Xtranormal for a class project, which we found to be both sustainable and attractive given the financial constraints of many of our students. The growing popularity of Xtranormal (Chan, 2011) brought about changes to their pricing structure (<http://www.Xtranormal.com/pricing/>). This was a strategic effort to attract organizations such as Geico and *The New York Times* that wish to develop and share short cartoon videos for the purposes of advertising products and services. They also recently opened the door to educators and their students to use Xtranormal at a discounted monthly rate of \$10 for the instructor and an additional \$0.50 per student. The primary difference between basic and organizational/educator membership (for pay) involves the number of characters, variety of sets, video quality, and production (i.e., electronically sharing and posting the final product). We were able to instruct our students to focus on the free features of the software and assured the students that they would not have to upgrade to the options requiring payment. It should be noted that the majority of students at both our institutions are on limited budgets and we felt it would be unfair to compel them to pay to use the software. We offer this anecdote to warn instructors who are considering using Xtranormal software that there may be further changes to their business model in the future. Such a possibility does not deter us from future use, but we felt it was important to offer this caution.

In addition, similar to other creative experiential group exercises, there is always a risk that students may choose to emphasize style over substance when it comes to using Xtranormal. We found it useful to provide specific directions that emphasized the exercise as an opportunity to apply key course concepts to their project. Setting clear expectations about the importance of professionalism and to not use the exercise in a way that would denigrate or humiliate an individual or group of individuals was also important. We are pleased to report that at no time did any group lack this professionalism or present material that was offensive.

Moving forward, instructors may wish to modify our prescribed exercise in order to tailor the use of the software to their instructional goals and course content. Instructors (and their students) could generate their own in-depth cases as well as video quizzes, and specific videos to illustrate certain foundational but perhaps dry concepts in HRM, organizational behavior, and other fields. For example, organizational behavior instructors could task various student groups to illustrate different motivational theories and have the class identify which theory the group was trying to illustrate. Instructors teaching labor relations could create an assignment where student groups illustrate various conflict-handling styles, mitigating factors in labor arbitration, or key events in labor history. Instructors in advanced HRM courses, such as training and development, may struggle with how to illustrate the role of technology in this critical HRM functional area. These instructors could develop an assignment where students use Xtranormal to illustrate the correct and incorrect way of handling a difficult trainee or common mistakes made by first time instructors or trainers.

It is our contention that the aforementioned exercise offers something fresh and new to management educators. We present an innovative approach that is easily transferable to others' classrooms and something that will appeal to a generation that comprises the majority of undergraduates at postsecondary institutions today. Furthermore, our study offers convincing evidence that the assignment and software are conducive to the sort of deeper level thinking that all management educators seek.

Appendix A

Xtranormal Tutorials and User Resources

- <http://www.Xtranormal.com/how-to/>

This URL offers helpful step-by-step demonstration videos on how to create, edit, and post videos. In addition, it provides useful information about account types, software versions, and a comprehensive user manual.

- <https://Xtranormal.zendesk.com/forums>

If you have a specific question about Xtranormal features or account information, this URL provides a vast library of resources. Users can use the Xtranormal database and search tool to explore various topics.

- <http://www.Xtranormal.com/pricing/>

Xtranormal shares its pricing options in an accessible table organized by account type. This is a useful resource when considering how best to use it to enhance your teaching and/or student learning.

Appendix B

HRM Training Role-Play Project

Scenario. In a team of about four, you will work collaboratively to gain a rich appreciation for uncovering the challenges and complexities of HRM in action. Imagine your team works in a training unit within a hospital that services a fairly substantial metropolitan population. This facility is a part of larger medical system in the southeastern United States. Your team is responsible for designing and delivering education programs for hospital employees. The HR Director has tasked your team to develop a training module for new employees as part of their “new-hire” orientation scheduled for December.

Expectations. In general, you will be responsible for covering topics related to managing and developing human capital resources in this particular organization. Your team will be responsible for using Xtranormal.com to develop a video case simulation to be used as part of the new-hire orientation. In addition, each team will present their video to the class at the end of the semester (DATE), along with discussing various details surrounding the training content and implementation in a written memo.

Learning Objectives

1. Design and evaluate a mock training for a new-hire orientation
2. Apply more than one training method and design that focus on the principles of adult learning and evaluation
3. Demonstrate an in-depth understanding of a specific HRM topic of the students’ choosing relevant to the training content
4. Provide points of analysis for the participating new-hires associated with the chosen HRM topic to support their understanding of the content being trained

Project Directions

- Each team will use www.Xtranormal.com to develop your respective video cases. You will develop a simulation video case study with the objective to help illustrate and improve HRM competency and skills for the new hires. The case should be focused on at least one topic covered during the semester (e.g., job design, recruitment, legal aspects of HRM, etc.). It should leave the viewer with a clear decision point to analyze/diagnose and stimulate discussion regarding potential recommendations.
- Use the login information here to create/edit your video case (username: xxxxx; password: xxxxx). Note that other teams will be using

this same login information as well so PLEASE do not edit or erase other teams' video cases. Given the potential costs associated with individual accounts, this shared account will provide access to a majority of the tools for developing and editing your videos.

- The video case should be between 5 and 8 minutes in length and include two characters in a dialogue. Use any theme and set and/or characters for your video case, but CONSIDER the appropriateness to your audience. Here is a link to a beginners' guide that your team may find useful: <https://Xtrnormal.zendesk.com/entries/387760-making-a-movie-in-Xtrnormal-movie-maker-the-beginner-s-guide>
- Do not "publish" your case, as that will require the use of points (\$\$\$). Simply keep the video in "movies in progress" mode. You can continually view/edit your movies without publishing them.

Presentation

- Each team will present their video case during their training session on the date indicated in the syllabus. Imagine you are presenting to new hires as part of the orientation mentioned above. Therefore, consider how you might use your video to stimulate discussion, showcase your main case problem/decision point (e.g., what is the main point; what should the character(s) do and why), and to ensure new hires learn from your training. You have the creative freedom in terms of designing the presentation (e.g., whether or not to use presentation software) and the degree to which you want the audience to participate.
- Make sure all team members participate, but keep your presentation to about 20 minutes. Also, expect questions from the professor and audience, as there will be a brief period after your presentation for question/answer discussion. Consider us participants in your training.

Memo. In preparation for your presentation and as part of evaluating your project performance, please be prepared to draft a brief 4-page memo answering the questions below. Ensure that your answers are concise, yet in-depth enough to showcase your knowledge of the content and training method. Be sure to also properly reference any literature utilizing a citation style of your choosing. It is due via email on the date indicated in the syllabus.

1. What tasks, knowledge, skills and/or behaviors does your training video emphasize? What specific needs would your case study satisfy in terms of organization, person and task if you were to actually conduct this training in a new-hire orientation?
2. What questions would you ask observers (new hires) about the material covered in the case to stimulate discussion and reflection? What

- other training activities would accompany this video (pre- and post-showing) to enhance learning? Why will these be helpful? Explain.
3. If you were to actually implement this training in a work setting, how would you measure the results of this training method? Explain and defend your particular measure and approach.
 4. What are the benefits of using this method to train employees? Are there any limitations? Explain.

Appendix C

Experiential Exercise Questionnaire

Please provide thoughtful, detailed answers to the following questions about your experience using Xtranormal as part of the HRM Training Role-Play Project. Note that your written responses will be submitted to a third-party individual to transcribe. Therefore, your original response sheets will be destroyed. To protect your anonymity, please do not include identifiable information (e.g., name, race, age, etc.).

1. Did the Xtranormal exercise help you understand and apply the concepts related to developing, implementing, and evaluating training efforts? Explain.
2. How would you describe the relative ease or difficulty of using this technology to develop a simulated video case?
3. How could the exercise, in its current form, be improved?
4. Would you consider this exercise more appropriate for an in-class exercise that required some out of class effort/collaboration with team members or do you think it was appropriate for a semester-long project to encapsulate a variety of HRM concepts/theories? Explain.
5. If you were asked to use Xtranormal in your other courses, or as part of this HRM course, where do you think it would be most helpful to understand theories/concepts? Examples and why?

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Notes

1. Please note that on July 31, 2013, the functionality and interface embedded in the Xtranormal software used for this team project was discontinued. This was a surprise to users in the Xtranormal community. Thankfully, the software developers are examining other options for 3D animated text-to-video in what they call "Act 2" forthcoming. In the meantime, available alternatives to Xtranormal include GoAnimate (<http://goanimate.com>), Voki (<http://www.voki.com>), and Reallusion (<http://www.reallusion.com>). The learning objectives, evidence of student learning, and the exercise design detailed herein remain relevant to readers who wish to utilize other text-to-video software similar to Xtranormal as an effective student-centered platform for encouraging creative and critical thinking.
2. See Howe and Strauss (2000) for a more thorough treatment of the literature on Millennials.

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