


Article:

ANOTHER TYPE OF GAP ANALYSIS

by John Montgomery

One of the greatest bureaucratic inventions – almost important as jargon – is gap analysis. It is a marvelous toy that whirls when it walks and so forth. Gap analysis can be used to create plans, whether really needed or not. Gap analysis can be used to delay or deflect intrusive, noisome innovations and restructuring or to portend their imminent arrival. It can be used to obfuscate official miscalculation and omission with the invisibility cloak of appearing to be pro-active. But enough of that invention, let us move onto a brief analysis of two other gaps. For this article, I have called them the **historical experience gap** and the **demographic experience gap**.

Each year, the staff at Beloit College in Wisconsin puts together a list to try to give the faculty a sense of the mind set of that year's incoming first year students. What follows is an abridged version of their 1998 list and, in *italics*, some matching comments about our current grade 10 students.

The people starting college this fall across the nation were born in 1980. *Our students were born between 1984 and 1986 – about the same time as our Charter of Rights and Freedoms!*

They have no meaningful recollection of the Reagan Era and did not know he had ever been shot. *Our students have no recollection of Joe Clark or Kim Campbell as Prime Ministers – or as previous members of Parliament.*

They were prepubescent when the Persian Gulf War was waged. *Our students were in kindergarten during the Gulf War.*

They were 10 when the Soviet Union broke apart and do not remember the Cold War. *Our students were in nursery school or watching Sesame Street as the Wall came down.*

They have never feared a nuclear war. "The Day After" is a pill to

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them, not a movie. *Our students – in some parts of Ontario – will be able to get this pill along with extra breath mints at a local pharmacy.*

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Their lifetime has always included AIDS and Ebola. *Don't forget Superbugs, Nile Virus and E Coli!!!!*

Most have never seen a TV set with only 13 channels, nor have they seen a black-and-white TV. *And what was this TV antenna stuff all about?*

There have always been VCRs, but they have no idea what BETA is. They cannot fathom not having a remote control. They were born the year that Walkmen were introduced by Sony. Roller-skating has always meant inline for them. *Our students know all about DVD, prefer Discmen, and scooters are all the rage.*

The Titanic was found? I thought we always knew where it was. *Our students know how the thing actually sunk and that there is a richly jewelled necklace down there now too.*



This list (and the longer, even more sweeping original from Beloit) was not written primarily to make most readers feel old and past-prime (although that happens). It was developed to highlight the breaks in learning and experience that seem to happen overnight between generations. And there is a positive purpose. Such a list – and the reflection it inspires – should heighten our awareness and understanding of this discontinuity of informed experience. We know more simply because we have been around at least 10 years longer than our Grade 10

students. In turn, this understanding should assist us in developing courses, units, lessons and activities that will bridge this **historical experience gap**.

The other experience gap which in some ways has always existed, seems to have been exacerbated in recent years. This gap could be called a **demographic experience gap**. In Ontario we seem to be enjoying a period of great social and economic mobility that sends out shock waves far beyond a simple address change. Urban centres and smaller rural towns are generally dwindling in population while the 'burbs are exploding – I live in Barrie, let me tell you about exploding. This mobility, either from or to, has created serious stresses for most communities *given current government proclivities* – and our students are caught up in this whirl.

Core, a York University newsletter (March 2000) reported on an extensive, co-operative 1998 research project by five universities (York, UofT, Ryerson, Queen's and Western) into the demographic characteristics of current undergraduates. I believe that many of their findings apply equally to many of our high school students. What

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follows is a selection from their findings.

- A large proportion of respondents were not born in Canada (38% for York – the range for the 5 schools went from 42% to 16%).
- Over a third (36%) of York respondents grew up in a home where English was not the language spoken.
- For York respondents, virtually half of the parents had completed less than post secondary education (47% of fathers, 56% of mothers), as compared with 39% and 47% respectively for the five university average. Over half of York students [**or about 45% of students in the five schools**] are having an experience which was denied to their parents. Students often have particular challenges to meet their academic and financial obligations and the domestic expectations of their parents.
- A majority of York students work during the academic year (62% worked an average of 17 hours/week. The average of the five universities was 48% working (during the academic year) at an average 15 hours/week.

These excerpts do not show startling new statistics. Canada has always been a land of immigrants. Language, cultural, economic and

expectation challenges were part of the process either in New France, Upper Canada, Sifton's Last Best West or post-1945 Ontario. However, *given current government proclivities*, we need to be very aware of the pressures on our students as well as those on ourselves.

Gaps in demographic as well as in historical experience can widen almost on their own and put mutual communication and learning nearly out of reach. Despite how we are being treated, it behooves us to assess and to evaluate our students as we would want to be assessed and evaluated – according to Canada's tradition of respecting and honouring our democratic and human rights.

