

# **From Baby Boomers to Generation Y Millennials: Ideas on How Professors Might Structure Classes for this Media Conscious Generation**

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*New techniques for matching instructional strategies for the Millennial generation have been researched and discussed in this article. Some comparisons with previous generations have been outlined. These strategies are meant to meet the learning needs of Generation Y Millennial students in order to make their education more meaningful in both the on ground and online teaching and learning environment. Specific examples have been provided for both venues with a focus on the online environment. Hopefully, these strategies will not only support learner centered instruction and interactivity, but will address the communication preferences of Millennials in today's colleges and universities.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Four groups were compared in various categories to make the transition to what is valued by the Millennials. Through these comparisons, various instructional strategies will be outlined to produce an effective learning environment for today's students (Wilson & Gerber, 2008).

### **The Generational Divide**

The *traditionalists* generation was born between 1925 and 1945. There were about seventy five million traditionalists. This group was considered loyal to their teachers and authority in general. They valued logic and discipline and teachers used lectures, memorization and one way communication to deliver content in teaching. The instructional strategies used were based on processing information and learning basic skills that were given to students by teachers. There was one right answer that did not allow for change or thinking "outside the box". It was important for students to learn basic facts and to be able to spell correctly, use correct grammar, and compute without using a calculator (Wilson & Gerber, 2008).

The *Baby Boomers* were born between 1946 and 1964. They were labeled the "Me" generation who wanted money, title, recognition and had the goal of building a stellar career. This group was team and process oriented and strove for convenience and self gratification. As students, they were confident of self, not authority. Teachers who taught this generation often used cooperative learning groups having students work on projects together in completing assignments. Paced learning with individual learning packets were often used in teaching this group. This was the age when progressivism was at its height. Contrary to the previous generation, there was less of an emphasis on learning the basic facts. Drill and Kill were ugly words to this group (Howe & Strauss, 1992).

*Generation X* was born between 1965 and 1980. There were about 46 million in this group. They wanted a balance between work and everyday living. They valued relationships over work and had a somewhat hopeless view of the future. This is not surprising in that they were born in the era of the

Vietnam War and the deaths of Martin Luther King and John and Robert Kennedy. These students valued freedom, flexibility and were motivated to build a portable career. This group grew up in the era of technology and television and wanted to be entertained in the classroom. They did not value working for one company for several years ending with getting a gold watch at retirement. Living in the here and now was more important than setting long range goals (Howe & Strauss, 1992).

*Generation Y/Millennials* were born between 1980 and 2002. There are 76 million in this group. “They are the largest, healthiest, and most care-for generation in American History” (Howe and Strauss, 2000 p. 76). Howe and Strauss (2000) state that this group has been protected from danger more than any other generation. “They have been buckled, watched, fussed over, and fenced in by wall-to wall rules and chaperones” (p. 116).

Howe and Strauss (2000) note that there are seven unique characteristics of Generation Y: “special; sheltered; confident; conventional, team-oriented; achieving and pressured” (p. 9). Everyone gets a trophy and they have been pressured to perform due to the focus on achievement.

This group has experienced many changes relating to technology. Today’s college students have spent 10,000 hours playing video games and 20,000 hours watching television. These students are digital natives, while most of their teachers are digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001). These students get bored with teachers who insist on lectures as the main focus of delivering instruction. Many educational institutions are not equipped to keep up with the pace of change related to the use of technology. The brick and mortar design of the buildings with little technology upgrades and the numbers of digital immigrant professors who are not comfortable with using technology result in a disconnect between the students and teachers. This group more than any of the other groups learn most effectively when a large variety of instructional strategies are used (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). In addition students want to have a voice and be included in the education redesign efforts.

### **Instructional Strategies to Teach the Millennials**

Millennials expect significantly increased learning options and far more educational services from their colleges and universities. It is important to provide many learning options and instructional strategies within courses to keep students’ attention and focus on learning. The current online teaching environment is especially suited to this group of students. Universities are now providing a variety of online teaching options which include: classes taught all online, as hybrids with half online and half on ground, and as e companions. E companion courses have all the tools of the online course which provides consistency in the content being taught either online or on ground.

These students work well in groups, so putting them in cooperative learning groups increases on task behavior. Millennials see themselves as the “us generation”, in contrast to the Boomers “Me generation”. They like the interaction of discussing the content with other students. Such egalitarianism disposes teachers to replace independent study with collaborative learning and peer review of performance” (Twenge, 2006, pp. 180-211). Putting students in cooperative groups in an online class fulfills this preference. In addition, their learning preferences tend toward using experiential activities, having structure, and using technology. Their strengths include: multitasking, being goal oriented, having positive attitudes, and being collaborative (Oblinger, 2003).

Millennials tend to have relatively short attention spans, so tasks can be altered and put in short learning time periods when doing group work. A KWL chart (What you Know, What you Want to Know, and What you Learned) is a good graphic organizer to use with this group. Students could also be put into groups to review content. Dialectical Journals could be used to structure a group response in writing relating to the lecture content and how it might be used in everyday life. Students want their learning to be relevant to future needs (Coates, 2007).

Videos imbedded into the course can be used to expand on the knowledge from a text or other materials. These videos could be chosen by the professor or by the students. These students have grown up in a media conscious world so the use of technology in classrooms is valued.

This group expects immediate feedback and they especially like to be praised for correct answers. A professor who provides students with an email address and/or mobile phone number may be perceived as

an open invitation to expectations of being able to call the professor at any time. Timely may mean different time frames to students. It is best to let students know up front how soon the professor will get back with responses to emails and the time period for returning graded papers to students.

Terms such as Bravo, Kudos to you on assignments are valued and these comments make students feel special and valued (Coates, 2007). Their life has been centered on gathering many trophies for sports and participation in special activities, so being valued is high on their list of expectations (Howe & Straus, 2000).

Millennials have been exposed through various forms of media. This has given them plenty of information, but not necessarily wisdom or the ability to reflect on the content. It is important to expand their learning and critical thinking skills. Reflective journal writing based on Bloom's Taxonomy could be used as one option to develop this skill.

For many students, goals need to be set so that projects can be completed in short pieces of assignment completion with dates when work will be reviewed and graded. Students also should be included in setting these goals. Peer review of work completed is valued as well as the grade given by a teacher (Twenge, 2006). Groups set up in the online environment could review each other's work and give constructive feedback and suggestions for improvement.

Respect by the teacher is very important as these students are not used to hearing NO. Questions answered are best not to be called incorrect but rather feedback given in the form of a statement by saying, "That is one way to think about that" or "Can someone else add to that answer"?

Contrary to previous generations, these students consider grades to be very important and most have the goal of studying hard to get the grades required to get acceptance into a "good" school. They make less negative comments about their parents as parents are viewed as having a positive impact on them. Students respect and want to please authority (teachers and parents) in contrast to previous generations (Howe & Straus, 2000).

Since this generation is considered to be *media savvy*, the following section focuses on how online teaching can be used effectively with these digital natives (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007).

### **Importance of Communication to the Millennials**

It is extremely important to have close communication and contact between students and faculty that happens often and is sincerely given and received. One effective mean of communication in the *online* venue may include making phone calls to students before the class begins to introduce the faculty member to the student and ask for information regarding the student's current professional status and his/her motivation and goal for taking the class. This offers a personal touch to the distance learning environment. Oftentimes, faculty asks students to post pictures on the website of themselves or something significant about their lives that they would like to share (i.e. family, pets, hobbies, etc.). This satisfies the needs of the Millennials to feel special (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Additionally, questions that might be asked include how many online courses the students may have taken, so that the professor is aware of any additional technology help that might be needed to increase the comfort level of the student.

Common contacts between students and faculty in the online venue are: emails, announcements, discussion board responses, virtual office, chat rooms, and threaded discussions. Announcements are often used to welcome students to the course, guide them in completing the course requirements, and to give general feedback (Coates, 2007). As an ongoing form of communication, announcements are essential to keep students informed. Weekly announcements accompanied with the same information sent through an email assure that students are kept up to date and that hopefully one or both will be read.

#### *Emails*

Emails are used to set up a continuous and positive interaction between students and instructor throughout the course. Prior to the start of the course, an email can be sent introducing the faculty member to the class with a Welcome Letter outlining course expectations and sharing a short bio of the faculty member including a picture. A personal connection can be made by asking students if they would like to receive a phone call from the professor with the preferred phone number and what time of day is

the best time to reach the student. Surprisingly, students list home phone numbers in the class contact information, but usually give cell phone numbers as the number of choice where they can be reached. It is best to ask for a response to the email to make sure the email is correct and that students are checking emails on a regular basis.

The course syllabus and outline can also be sent so that students are prepared for the first day of the course. Emails can be used for daily and weekly reminders of assignments that are due and when papers have been graded and put in the grade book for them to access and review. Similar messages can be sent and posted on the Announcements page. Students may use email as a way to create a learning community outside the class where they can exchange ideas and share information regarding their particular status regarding schooling, education, and work collectively on ideas regarding assignments.

Students' individual questions for the instructor can also be asked and answered through this communication tool. It is extremely important for instructors to be actively present in all tools of the course so that students feel they are getting constructive feedback in a timely manner. Getting feedback in a timely manner is usually a question given to students as a means of evaluating the course and the instructor (Howe & Strauss, 2007).

#### *Announcements*

Announcements made by the instructor, serve as a one way communication and do not necessarily increase contact among students or provide active learning. However, they do provide quick and convenient feedback and are also helpful in keeping students focused and on task, clarifying assignments and expectations, providing quick reminders and giving general feedback on class work. This form of communication is best if paired with an email containing the same content as some students prefer and check for communication in one or the other formats, but not both. Two announcements per week serve as a continual stream of updates to the course. This is yet another form of providing constant feedback (Coates, 2007).

#### *Virtual Office*

Virtual Office is a way to provide a simulated office space to support student-faculty communication which can allow for questions students have regarding assignments and to support student faculty communication. An effective format for this is to post the most frequently asked questions by students with the answers given for those questions. This helps students feel that although they have individual concerns, their questions often relate to the whole group. Hours for the virtual office should be posted with a time frame on when students' questions will be answered.

#### *Threaded Discussion Board*

Topics related to the course are posted in these discussion boards. They are meant as a way to discuss in-depth certain topics related to the course content. This is one tool that can be used to foster critical thinking skills. Pros and cons of topics can be discussed so that students analyze the content to make it relevant to what they are learning (Coats, 2007). Instructors can use this format to add additional information to the topic so as to promote the sense that the instructor is an expert. Millennials respect competence. Students can also share their expertise with other students and elaborate on their experiences related to similar topics. It is also a means of validating what they are learning by extending knowledge learned to their daily experiences. For this group, it is cool to be smart and show your expertise on topics. It is considered sharing and not bragging. They like to utilize their talents to be useful and helpful (Coats, 2007).

If threaded discussions are used correctly, they can serve to promote an effective learning community. Some students like to alternate between discussions in groups with students with similar training and experiences and some like to broaden their knowledge by having discussions with students outside the realm of their current experience.

### *Document Sharing*

Document Sharing is part of the online platform that may be used to share documents related to the course content. Sample papers for assignments are usually welcomed by students to assist them in knowing the assignment format and rubric for papers. They do not want to waste time guessing what the instructor wants. Rubrics for assignments with precise criteria and point values for various parts of a project are essential. Students want structure in what is expected (Oblinger, 2003). Since their goal is to be successful, any assistance in their meeting this objective is greatly appreciated. "At a time when higher school standards have risen to the top of America's political agenda, Millennials take academic achievement seriously" (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 22).

Students like to share information they have researched regarding the course and post it in document sharing for all students to see and use. This is also a place where students could share their assignments for peer review.

If a Class Scrapbook is put together with information regarding students in the class, this scrapbook could also be included in this section. In the online venue, students like sharing pictures and information about themselves. This provides a personal touch in the distant cyber space environment.

### *Weblibliography*

Supplemental web-based resources related to the course content can be uploaded here. Students like to share favorite websites which add to the knowledge and expertise of all in the class. An annotated weblibliography is a way to make course content more expansive and up to date. Change happens so quickly in many content areas, so websites are essential in making course content current and relevant (Coates, 2007).

### *Synchronous Chat*

The chat room can be used to simulate an onsite course in that students can meet via the internet to share ideas, discuss course content, ask questions, and form individual breakout rooms where students can work in small groups that can function as quasi professional learning communities. Multi-media lectures can be delivered by students and professors to simulate the exchanges in an on ground course. Power point presentations can be shared with the whole class as part of their class assignments. Offering students and instructors a synchronous forum for live discussions, the chat room provides a highly interactive environment. As video technology improves and broad band issues are resolved, this has the possibility of opening up exchanges of students in different countries and the whole of the United States. This will be a necessary and sufficient means of education in a global society. This satisfies many of the learning preferences of the Millennials, i.e. teamwork, experiential activities, and the use of technology (Oblinger, 2003).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Comparisons have been made to previous generations and their expectations of the teaching and learning environment. It is important to make learning personal and relevant to all generations, but this is especially true for this Generation Y group of students. Millennials offer a challenge that can be met through the use of a variety of instructional strategies to meet their needs. Examples from the online teaching platform have been reviewed as that venue seems to offer the best opportunity for success in teaching this media savvy generation. Future professional development for professors should focus on the use of technology in teaching their students so as to meet the learning needs of these digital natives (Prensky, 2001).

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