

Millennials: Our Newest Generation in Higher Education

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Years ago the majority of our students was about the same age and attended traditional face-to-face classrooms. Today, our undergraduate students can range from 17 year old high school graduates, to 28 year old “non-traditional” students, to 40 year old single working mothers who may be taking the same classes as their own children and can be involved in a variety of classroom settings. In this mix we find a group of students born between 1982 and 2000 who are dubbed the “Millennial” generation. Although not inherently different than any other student, the Millennial generation has characteristics unique to the digital age.

Born 1982 through 2000, Millennials are the most diverse generation we have had to teach, thus our approaches to teaching must be diverse. “Millennials expect to be engaged in their learning, they do not do well being passive learners. If you (as a teacher/university) do not have technology that will be part of their learning, they will go somewhere else where they can be engaged with, and interactive with, technology. Millennials perceive a sharp contrast between their comfort level of technology and the technology comfort level of their teachers” (Starlink, 2004). These technologies include the cell phones, computers and the Internet.

The trend toward Millennials using iPods and laptop computers rather than desktop computers reflects their preference toward a more portable learning environment. Millennials use texting and instant messaging (IM) to communicate with peers and set up meetings and use email to clarify course information and expectations. The Internet allows students to “express ideas that they would not have voiced in class” and is the preferred method of conducting research (Starlink, 2004, p. 10).

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Traditional approaches to teaching may not address the learning preferences of the Millennial student. Lectures and traditional classroom and laboratory environments, albeit typical (and comfortable) from an educator’s point of view, can be enhanced through online and electronic modes. For example, MIT’s microelectronics lab that is available 24x7, where students can conduct lab work at their convenience and the University of Virginia’s interactive Web site “The Valley of the Shadow,” which allows students to draw their own conclusions about the Civil War through researching original material and data via a variety of sources (Starlink, 2004). Students can be more engaged and motivated to learn by providing authentic learning experiences instead of “lecturing” the facts. We should consider creating learner-centered classroom environments to engage Millennials.

Games and simulations can “help learners visualize complex systems” such as magnifying an environment otherwise not possible in some situations. For example, “seeing” the inside of a cell, changing the speed of chemical reactions,

or visualizing an acoustical environment can help students better understand the environment (Starlink, 2004).

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Considering the fact that many of our students are working full- and part-time jobs while taking classes, we may need to “repurpose” our teaching practices. Similar to the ways students may have to juggle time committed to work and studies, so too, faculty may need to approach the classroom with new and inventive ways to impart learning. To address these new approaches, faculty can offer deliberate and meaningful learning experiences and opportunities where students can see the connections between new material and real world applications.

Millennial Student Attributes

The following list includes several attributes of students who have grown up with technology that may influence the way you teach (adapted from Frand, as cited in Starlink, 2004):

“Computers are not technology.” Computers, the Internet, and the WWW are as much a part of Millennials’ lives as telephones and television are to previous generations.

“Reality is no longer real.” Original images can easily be changed using digital technology and receiving email from an address may not come from the owner of that address.

“Doing is more important than knowing.” Knowledge is no longer perceived to be the ultimate goal (the half-life of information is so short). Results and actions are considered more important than the accumulation of facts.”

“Learning more closely resembles Nintendo than logic.” Nintendo symbolizes a trial-and-error approach to solving problems; losing is the fastest way to mastering a game because losing represents learning.”

“Multitasking is a way of life.” Students are comfortable engaging in several activities simultaneously. Working on homework with music in the background while talking or texting on their cell phone is typical of how Millennials get through the day.

“There is zero tolerance for delays.” Millennials were raised in a just-in-time, service-oriented culture. They expect and demand quick turn around in today’s 24x7 culture and do not easily accept delays.

“Consumer and creator are blurring.” In a file-sharing, cut-and-paste world, distinctions between creator, owner, and consumer of information are fading. The operative assumption is often that if something is digital, it is everyone’s property” (Starlink, 2004, p. 10-11).

Summary

As we learn more about the needs of all of our students, from the Millennials to the Gen X'ers, to the 50 year-old Baby Boomer, let's consider how we can meet their needs and "expectations for service, immediacy, interactivity, and group activities" (Starlink, 2004, p.15). It is not necessary to abandon traditional lecture or other tried and true instructional strategies but adapting them to suit the Millennial and other students is crucial to effective teaching and learning. Our students represent backgrounds as diverse as the subjects we embrace and scrutinize the way we teach, the way we communicate, and the way we interact with them. Let's be at the forefront of those who will meet the needs of the ever growing, *digital students*.

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