

When Generations Collide in the Classroom

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“Students today are so different from when I was in college.” Have you ever made this comment to someone or had this thought? Students today *are* different. They are different in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, age, learning styles, languages, preparedness for college work, and college experience. Yet often overlooked are the diverse values, attitudes, and beliefs we develop as a part of our generation. Such generational influences establish different motivation levels, work ethics, and worldviews that impact teaching and learning. Understanding generational differences, therefore, may enhance one’s impact and effectiveness in the classroom.

For the first time in history, four different generations may be present in our classrooms, especially when you include faculty. In 2000 and 2001, Lancaster and Stillman (2002) conducted a survey of over 400 respondents representing all parts of the country and different ethnic groups. They found that the values, attitudes, and beliefs of people from different generations were related to their attitudes toward work and careers. Though Lancaster and Stillman’s research was intended to answer questions relevant to the generational puzzle in business and industry, such information can help educators glean how such attitudes may impact teaching and learning in the classroom.

Before reading on, take a minute and identify the generation of which you are a part. If you were born between 1900 and 1945, you are considered a *Traditionalist* and a member of the generation Tom Brokaw (1998) wrote about in his best-selling book, *The Greatest Generation*. You are considered a *Baby Boomer* if you were born between 1946 and 1964. *Generation Xers* were born between 1965 and 1980, and *Millennials*, also referred to as the Echo Boom, Generation Y, or the myspace.com generation, represent those people born between 1981 and 1999.

Now reflect for a moment on your history: the people, places, and events that helped shape your attitudes and values. Consider the music, media, fads, and technology you have experienced. What might this say about you? Lancaster and Stillman (2002) outlined the following conditions that make each generation unique. They are not exhaustive descriptions, but rather give a taste of the varying forces that have shaped each generation.

Traditionalists

As a Traditionalist, you may recall Joe McCarthy, Dr. Spock, Alfred Hitchcock, Ella Fitzgerald, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Charles Lindbergh, John Wayne, Bob Hope, and Betty Crocker. Do you remember Pearl Harbor, Korea, the Bay of Pigs, Victory gardens, and bomb shelters? Did you

listen to big band, jazz, or sing-a-long with Mitch? Do you remember listening to the radio, playing 78 or 33 LPs on the record player, or getting your first television set?

Because this generation lived through two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the New Deal, they learned to do without, as resources were scarce when they were young. They had simple toys as children and saw the advent of black and white television. These experiences helped shape Traditionalists into loyal and patriotic individuals who have faith in institutions. They believe in following the “chain of command” and value the opportunity to learn and grow. The G.I. Bill gave many of these individuals the chance to earn a college education. Traditionalists trust the authority of their professors and the college institution. They often are model students who are grateful for the chance to gain knowledge and realize new skills. Professors from this generation may expect their students to show an appreciation toward learning and not question how things are done in their classrooms. They may expect students to be grateful for, and happy about, the chance to earn an education.

Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers may recall Martin Luther King, Jr., Richard Nixon, John F. Kennedy, Beaver Cleaver, Rosa Parks, the Manson family, the Osmond family, Gloria Steinem, Janis Joplin, Captain Kangaroo, Captain Kirk, the Beatles, Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Elvis Presley, and Fidel Castro. They likely remember Watergate, the Hanoi Hilton, Kent State, bell bottom pants, tube tops, mood rings, POW bracelets, their first trip to McDonalds, and the drug culture. They listened to folk music and rock-and-roll on 45 rpm records and 8-track tapes.

As you can see, Baby Boomers experienced a very different world than Traditionalists. They lived through the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, the women’s movement, the OPEC oil embargo, the Cold War, Woodstock, the recession, and the divorce courtroom. They had sit-ins, love-ins, and Laugh-In. Such events shaped Baby Boomers into optimistic idealists, who pushed for change. They question authority and follow more of a “change of command” mentality. Because of their sheer numbers (80 million), they are competitive and live to work. They view hard work and effort as the paths to achievement, and believe nothing will be handed to them unless they work for it. As students, they competed for admission into college and worked hard to succeed in school. They may believe that colleges should change to reflect the needs and desires of their students. Professors of the Baby Boomer generation may expect their students to work hard and prioritize education. Their attitude may be that students should want to succeed academically. These professors may conclude that students are lazy when they do not spend a lot of time studying, learning, and making college the main focus of their lives.

Generation Xers

As a Generation Xer, you may recall the Brat Pack, Bill Clinton, Bill Gates, the Ayatollah Khomeini, Ted Bundy, Al Bundy, Clarence Thomas, supermodels, O.J. Simpson, Mr. Rogers, Madonna, Jim and Tammy Faye Baker, Donna Rice and Gary Hart, and Michael Jackson. You likely remember disco, Atari, Somalia, Chernobyl, the Challenger explosion, Betamax and VCRs, the Alaskan oil spill, the TailHook scandal, microwaves, Desert Storm, CDs, MTV, “no new taxes,” and “Mr.Gorbachev, tear down that wall.”

Generation Xers more than any other generation witnessed the breakdown of every major societal institution and the beginnings of the technological revolution. They experienced Watergate and the Iran arms scandal, and saw religious, military, and political figures stumble. Even Supreme Court justices were called into question when Anita Hill testified at Clarence Thomas' nomination hearing. The dynamics of family life changed as the divorce rate tripled, producing a large number of single moms and latchkey teens. AIDS awareness began, and the Berlin Wall came down, ending the Cold War. The breakdown in these institutions shaped Generation Xers into skeptical and distrustful individuals. They have more faith in themselves and prefer to "self-command." They are resourceful, independent, and work to live. As students, they may prefer to work on their own or shape their own learning. They may play devil's advocate, questioning authority and institutional policies. Professors from this generation may expect students to learn independently and always question the material and their professors. They may feel uncomfortable planning group work and activities, and expect students to be comfortable using the tools of technology.

Millennials

Millennials comprise the majority of today's college students. Their values, attitudes, and beliefs have been shaped most dramatically by technology, which gives them instant access to pop culture and the material world. Their childhoods included such events as Columbine, day care, the Oklahoma City bombings, and, most recently, the terrorist attacks on September 11th. They grew up with Chelsea Clinton, Tinky Winky, Ricky Martin, Barney, Britney Spears, the Backstreet Boys, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Sammy Sosa, and Saddam Hussein. They listen to hip-hop, rap, R & B, and rock on their mp3 players; have readily available illegal drugs; and can travel to any location via the Internet. They have cell phones, computers, virtual malls, and Instant Messaging. Such conditions have fostered a generation that is realistic, capable of multi-tasking, flexible, and appreciative of diversity. They want tasks to be fun and prefer to "collaborate" rather than command.

Generational Differences and Teaching

Understanding generational differences can impact both your teaching and your students' learning. To use this knowledge effectively, you must first examine your attitudes toward your students. For example, a Traditionalist might believe that students should be more appreciative of their educational opportunities, whereas a Baby Boomer might believe that students simply don't put in enough effort and want everything handed to them on a silver platter. Do you believe that today's students do not have the attention span that students in previous years did? Although this is possible, it is also possible that today's students are just great at multi-tasking and dividing their attention. Do you feel that today's students exhibit an air of entitlement? Well, given that Millennials are as big a generation as the Baby Boomers, this might actually turn out to be reality. There are not enough Generation Xers to take the place of Baby Boomers, because Generation Xers are only half the size of the Baby Boom generation. As a result, many Millennials will be given not only more opportunities, but more opportunities at a younger age than previous generations.

Because the majority of college instructors are not a part of the Millennial generation, they may find it difficult to relate to many of their students. How then can we more effectively teach this generation? First, consider the learning environments that you offer to your students. Because of their upbringings, Millennials will be better served by flexible learning environments. We have already seen this occur on college campuses across the United States. Many courses now emphasize service learning, and many are delivered via hybrid or online classes. In addition, learning communities are also becoming more popular. Students also want to have fun in the classroom. They want to understand how course material relates to their lives, and they want to participate in the learning process. Hence, student-led discussions, video snippets, portfolios, peer-reviewed writing, active learning demonstrations, and other activities appeal to Millennials. Technology is not our foe but rather a great tool that can be used to enhance education for Millennial students. Course management systems (e.g., WebCT, Blackboard), e-mail, discussion boards, PowerPoint slides, student response systems, and computer-based games and tutorials all appeal to the Millennial's savvy technological skills. Yet such tools require us to be trained in and use this technology.

Although we typically have fewer students from other generations in our classes, teaching diverse generations can be a challenging balancing act. For example, whereas Millennial and Generation X students tend to be comfortable with the use of technology, Traditionalist and Baby Boomer students may initially be intimidated by it. They need time, structure, and hands-on learning to alleviate their "computer anxiety." However, they also typically have a strong desire and motivation to learn these skills. On the flip side, Millennial students, being younger, have fewer life experiences to relate to psychology. Older students will have many life experiences to share with younger students. Traditionalist students in particular may feel very comfortable working in groups with Millennial students where they can in effect become authority figures. Whereas Millennial students value collaboration and group work, Generation Xers prefer to work independently. Hence, making assignments flexible so that students can work independently or in groups will appeal to all generations.

Take it from a skeptical Generation Xer—there are many ways we can reach and educate students from diverse generations. Being flexible and providing a variety of assignments and activities are key factors for success. I may not be teaching the same way I did 10 or 15 years ago, but then again, my students are not the same. Each generation has positive attributes that make our classes more diverse. The wide array of experiences that professors and students from different generations bring to the classroom allows them to learn from one another. This in turn fosters tolerance and acceptance, and enhances professional growth and development.

References

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