Teaching the Next Generation

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April’s Trend of the Month addresses the compelling need in education to address different generational characteristics in our parents, teachers, administrators and students. In a very timely example of this need, Teachers: The Next Generation, by Harry K. Wong and Rosemary T. Wong and published by ASCD1, makes the case that young teachers entering the work force today are from the Millennial generation, a generation that has grown up immersed in technology and which thrives on collaboration. Yet teacher induction programs are largely founded on Baby Boomer-centric models of one-on-one mentoring that are often counter to Millennial strengths and preferences, thereby setting up new teachers for failure. Generational misunderstandings such as this may contribute to many of the teaching, learning, and operational difficulties that seem to bog us down and get in the way of improvement and change.

Who are the Millennials?

Different authors debate the precise birth years that bracket a ‘generation.’ It is generally accepted that the Millennials, or Gen Y as they are sometimes called, are the generation born beginning in the late 1970s/early 1980s. Some say babies born today are still of the Millennial generation, though it may be that we have entered a new generation since 9/11. Generations are typically defined as groups that experience common formative experiences, such as the Greatest Generation of the World Wars, and the Baby Boomers who experienced the post-war surge. So, too, have Millennials experienced a common era, one of prosperity, protective parenting, relative peace, and innovation. These common experiences have shaped a generation with unique collective characteristics very different from the generations that may be teaching and raising them.

Millennials are the largest current generation, making up 36 percent of the U.S. population. As of 2000, there were about 100 million children and youth aged 0-22. They are also the most diverse generation, being 31% minority. Interestingly, they have developed a perception that they are a unique cohort that is distinct from other generations. 69% of Millennials agree that they have a unique generational identity, while the norm for older generations ranges from 42-50%. Millennials find much in common with each other, perhaps amplifying in their eyes the differences between themselves and their elders.2

Millennials were born as parenting styles became more protective. Parents that were themselves latch-key kids and who experienced the period of rising divorce rates have committed to raising their own children differently. These parents are the “Baby on Board” parents, the parents with video cameras to record first steps, first words, first days at school, and first perfect attendance

awards. Adults are focused on child safety and protecting children. Millennial children are growing up in schools focused on higher standards, character education, cooperative learning, uniforms, and community service. Perhaps as a result, this is a team-oriented, “good kid” generation, experiencing drops in drug abuse, crime, and teen pregnancy.³

Likewise, this is a generation used to being consulted by adults, used to participating in decisions that affect them, and used to being protected by their elders. They feel the pressure of high expectations and participation in an adult world. Consequently, members of this generation feel that they are growing up in challenging times; 60% of teens feel it is harder being a young person today than in their parent’s time (up from 35% in 1966), but are more optimistic about how their life will be when they are 21.⁴

The oldest Millennials have graduated from high school and entered the workforce. Four generations (the Greatest (Traditionalists), the Boomers, the Xers, and the Millennials) are working together in close proximity for the first time in history. Couple this with new global economic and productive pressures, and the bright light of scrutiny falls on the education of Millennials in preparation for the workplace – and on the behavior of Millennials in the workplace and society, as the Teachers: The Next Generation article illustrates.

How do Millennials compare to other generations?

As explained above, generations are shaped by common experiences and generally share common traits. In When Generations Collide, Lancaster and Stillman⁵ present what seem to be the most intuitively recognizable definitions of workplace characteristics of different generations, from which the potential for generational misunderstandings and clashes is apparent.

Figure 1. Generational Characteristics

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<tr>
<th>Living generation</th>
<th>Workplace Archetype</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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| Traditionalists (b. 1901-1945) | Loyalist | • Have learned that putting aside individual needs and wants and working together for a common goal can accomplish great things
• Faith in institutions, including church, government, and military
• Top-down management style: leaders need to lead and troops need to follow |


<table>
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<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Outlook</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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| Baby Boomers     | Optimist| • Grew up in an opportunity-rich world  
• Focused energies on righting wrongs  
• Have had to compete with 80 million peers  
• Expect interpersonal communication and information sharing  
• Deeply identify with who they are and what they achieve at work |
| Generation X     | Skeptic | • Less faith in institutions and more faith in themselves as individuals  
• Participated in an unprecedented technological revolution and are comfortable with multiple media  
• Resourceful and independent  
• Count on their peers and themselves to get things done |
| Millennials      | Realist | • “Joyride on the information superhighway”  
• Are comfortable in both virtual and physical space  
• Have been directly affected by threats to safety - list “personal safety” as number one workplace issue  
• Appreciate, and expect, diversity  
• Tough to bully but great to collaborate |

We see examples of these generational clashes played out regularly in our schools. The very issue of school choice may reflect Gen X parents’ independence from the traditional institution of ‘school’ and their resourcefulness to create schools that, they feel, best meet the needs of their children as individuals. We also see conflicts around school policies that may be reflective of deeper generational culture, such as those around cell phones in schools where administrators (Boomers) ban phones that parents (Xers) believe their children need, and students (Millennials) effortlessly incorporate into every aspect of their lives. Granted, these are simplistic generalizations, both of complex issues and complex individuals. But these are also illustrative of how a lack of understanding and appreciation for different generational characteristics and values can bring about conflict and impasse.

**What about Millennials as students?**

Millennials themselves expect and demand much from those who prepare them. As many as 40% of high school graduates say that there are gaps between the education they received in high school and the overall skills, abilities, and work habits expected of them today in college and the work force – including gaps in mathematics, writing, science, oral communication, and critical thinking. Evidence of these gaps is supported by employers and college instructors.

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6 *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work? A Study of Recent High School Graduates, College Instructors, and Employees.*  

7 *The American Diploma Project. Ready or Not: Creating a high school diploma that counts.*  
[http://www.achieve.org/node/552](http://www.achieve.org/node/552)
Furthermore, Millennials increasingly see little relevance of the traditional instructional delivery of content to their own experiences and reality. As Kim Farris-Berg states in *Listening to Student Voices*, high school students “challenge adult decision-makers to start allowing consumer/student input to be a driver in school and education redesign efforts” but find that “Not only do K-12 designers largely ignore consumer input, but designers are also basing their decisions on theories that run counter to their consumers’ needs and desires.”8

For example, today’s average college graduates have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games and 20,000 hours watching television. These students are *digital natives*, a term coined by Marc Prensky to reflect the technological adeptness and expectation of users who have grown up immersed in digital technology.9 By contrast, most educators are *digital immigrants*, those for whom digital technology is a second language rather than a native tongue. Digital immigrants tend towards sequential processing and task-oriented uses of technology. Digital natives are increasingly disengaged by the styles of digital immigrants like their teachers, who insist on lecture, text and segmented single tasks. These Millennials parallel-process and multi-task; they prefer their graphics *before* their text; they prefer random access and perform best when they are networked and ‘plugged in.’ They thrive on instant gratification. And they do not often find these conditions at school.10

So why are generational differences important enough to warrant Trend of the Month space? Because education needs to get this right. We have four distinct generations, each with unique and sometimes opposing characteristics, working and learning together. It is difficult even under the best of times to make teaching and learning successful for all, and these are not the best of times. Generational misunderstandings turn what could be a tremendous asset into a barrier. Education professionals are in a perfect position to capitalize on the collective strengths of *four generations* to improve education practice and student learning. We, as professionals, need to open our minds to the different strengths that our colleagues and students bring to our work – and let go of our own generational baggage – if we are to fulfill the inarguable premise that no child should be left behind.

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http://educationevolving.org/pdf/Listening_to_Student_Voices.pdf
