Teaching the Millennial Generation

If you are teaching traditional-age students, you need to know some basics about this generation, which has come to be called generation Y, the Net generation, the NeXt generation, and most commonly, the millennial generation. A great deal has been written about it, and this section provides a quick synthetic summary (Bureau & McRoberts, 2001; Carlson, 2005; Feathersone, 1999; Frand, 2000, Hersch, 1998; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Lowery, 2001; Nathan, 2005; Oblinger, 2003; Plotz, 1999; Raines, 2002; Strauss & Howe, 2003; Taylor, 2006; Tucker, 2006). The generalizations seem to apply to at least the bulk of middle-and upper-middle-class millennials.

This generation comprises children born between 1982 (some say 1980) and 1995 to the late baby boomers. These parents kept their children's lives busily structured with sports, music lessons, club meetings, youth group activities, and part-time jobs. In their spare time, young millennials spent many hours on the computer, often the Internet, interacting with peers, doing school work, playing games, shopping, and otherwise entertaining themselves. Unless they attended private or college-town schools, they received a weaker K-12 education than previous generations. Still, they flooded into colleges and universities starting around 2000. Their combined family and school experience, along with their heavy mass media exposure, made them self-confident, extremely social, technologically sophisticated, action bent, goal oriented, service or civic minded, and accustomed to functioning as part of a team. On the flip side, they are also impatient, demanding, stressed out, sheltered, br and oriented materialistic, and self-centered. They use---and abuse---alcohol and prescription drugs more than street drugs. Although skeptical about authority, they tend not to be particularly rebellious, violent, or promiscuous. With so much activity in their lives as well as frequent interaction with friends and family (much on computers and cell phones), they have little time or inclination for reflection, self-examination, or free-spirited living. Another feature of this generation, one that distinguishes it from so many preceding ones, is that millennials do not hunger for independence from their parents. Quite the contrary, they stay close to the parents through college (and often beyond) and turn to their parents for help when organizations don't meet their needs. These parents have earned the descriptor of "helicopter parents" for hovering over their grown children to ensure their well-being and competitive advantage in life.

For college faculty, this generation can be challenging to deal with. Millennials view higher education as an expensive but economically necessary consumer good, not a privilege earned by hard work and outstanding performance. They (or their parents) "purchase" it for the instrumental purpose of opening well-paying occupational doors on graduation, so they feel entitled to their degree for the cost of the credits. As may of them did little homework for their good grades through high school, they anticipate the same minimal demands in college and are often resentful about the amount of reading, research, problem solving, and writing that we assign them and about the standards that we hold for their work. Those whose grades slip in college feel their
self-esteem threatened and may react with depression, anxiety, defensiveness, and even anger against us. In addition, they hear a lot a "bad news" from us in their classes: that they didn't learn enough in high school to handle college, that knowledge bases are full of holes and unsolved mysteries, that their beliefs and values are subject to question and debate, and that both college and the real world demand that they work and prove their worth.

Not only are we bearers of bad news, however inadvertently, but we are also very different from them and difficult to fathom and identify with. We prize the life of the mind, we love to read, and we work long hours for relatively little money. We must remember that this generation values money and what it can buy. Aside from the materialism that their parents and the mass media promoted, these young people face the prospect of being the first generation at least in the United States, that cannot afford a standard of living comparable to that of their parents, let alone higher. So while some observers call millennials hopeful, others point to their economic anxiety (Levine & Cureton, 1998).

In any case, our modest material status, coupled with all our education, does not inspire a great deal of their respect. To them, we render customer service, a somewhat menial calling, to a society that doesn't value abstraction, intellectual discourse, or knowledge for knowledge's sake. There's just no money in them. Therefore, if they are dissatisfied with our services (usually workload, grades, or our responsiveness to their desires), they complain to our "bosses," often involving their parents to bolster their power. They sense they have the upper hand: that instructors are subject to being disciplined or even fired at administrative will and that institutions want to retain students and keep them happy. In this quasi-corporate model, the customer is always right, whether she is or not. So millennials can be demanding, discourteous, inpatient, time-consuming, and energy sapping. For the same reason, colleges and universities have been upgrading their residence halls, food services, recreational and workout facilities, tutoring programs, computing, and teaching (with an eye toward boosting student ratings).

Despite the difficulties millennials may present, this generation can be easy to reach if we make a few adjustments. After all, they have career goals, positive attitudes, technological savvy, and collaborative inclinations. In addition, they are intelligent enough to have learned a lot, even if it is not the knowledge the we value. Our adjustments need not include lowering our own standards.

Although millennials are understandably cynical about authority (so are we) and don't assume we have their best interests at heart, they value communication and information and respond well when we explain why we use the teaching and assessment methods we do. We can "sell" them on the wisdom of our reading selections, assignments, in-class activities, and rubrics, reinforcing the fact that we are the experts in our field and in teaching it. As experts, we should have solid, research-based reasons for our choices. Why not show our students the respect of sharing these reasons?

Millennials also want to know that we care about them. Remember that they are still attached to their parents and not far from the nest. They are also accustomed to near-constant interaction, so they do want to relate to us. Showing that we care about their
learning and well-being---by calling them by name, asking them about their weekend, promising we will do whatever it takes to help them learn, stating how much we want them to be successful, and voicing our high expectations of them---will go very far in earning their loyalty and trust.

Finally, having led a tightly organized childhood and adolescence and not being rebellious, they respond well to structure, discipline, rules, and regulations. If you set up or have them set up a code of classroom conduct (see Chapter Seven), they will generally honor it. If you promise that you will answer their email at two specific times each day and you follow through, they will not expect you to be available 24/7. Whatever course policies your syllabus states, as long as they are clear and airtight, the students will generally respect them, though a few may try to pressure you to bend your rules. Even their parents will usually withdraw their demands for grade information if you clearly explain any applicable restrictions under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. What millennials consider unprofessional is an instructor's (apparent) disorganization, ill preparation, or inability to stick to her own syllabus.

Of course, blanket statements about an entire generation always apply to only a portion of its members. Biggs (2003) has another take on it. He describes an undergraduate profile applicable to both the British Commonwealth nations and the United States, and he puts a face on it---two faces, actually. There is "Susan," the archetypal "good" student---intelligent, well prepared, goal oriented, and motivated to master the material. Susan came to college with solid thinking, writing, and learning skills. While about three-quarters of today's college students were like her in 1980, only about 42 percent are like her today (Brabrand & Andersen, 2006). The rest (almost 60 percent) are like "Robert," who is much less academically talented, college ready, and motivated to learn (Brabrand & Andersen). He just wants to get by with the least amount of learning effort so he can parlay his degree into a decent job. He will rely on memorizing the material rather than reflecting on and constructing it. "Good teaching," according to Biggs, is "getting most students to use the higher cognitive level processes that the more academic students use spontaneously" (p. 5)---that is, changing Roberts into Susans.

When you divide the student population the way Biggs does, the millennial generation doesn't look so monolithic, and no matter where we teach, we find both types of students in our classes. A sizable minority of them are interested in learning and know something about how to do it, even if they are so materialistic, tied to their parents and on Facebook. While we can generalize about millennials, we must not forget that they are the most diverse generation---economically, politically, ethically, racially, and culturally---that North American intuitions of higher learning have ever welcomed.

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