

## **The Millennials: Getting to Know Our Current Generation of Students**

Janelle L. Wilson  
University of Minnesota Duluth

### **Xer meets Millennial**

As a new assistant professor back in the mid-1990s, sharing generational membership with my students eased the establishment of rapport. I was able to give examples and suggest applications of the material that were, for the most part anyway, relevant and meaningful to the students. In recent years, however, the reality of the generational gap now experienced between me and my students cannot be denied. Ten years ago I felt compelled to provide insight into how certain factors had shaped Generation X and, as a member of the generation myself; I could identify with and relate to some of the frustrations and motivations of Gen Xers.<sup>i</sup> Now I am setting out to better understand our current generation of students: the Millennials. While Generation X is considered to include those who were born between 1961 and 1981, the Millennial Generation is typically considered to refer to those born between 1982 and 2002. Following a description of the primary ways that I have gathered information on this topic, we shall embark upon a generational overview highlighting similarities and differences between Xers and Millennials.

### **Methods**

Two years ago I participated in a University of Minnesota Bush Foundation Grant, the general subject of which was to enhance students' self-regulation and motivation and to develop reflexive practitioners. I selected, as the primary objective of my study, finding constructive ways to ensure that students do the assigned readings in their classes. It was during this grant period that I collected data from convenience samples of current students at the university where I teach. The data were collected through use of a focus group as well as more informal means. The latter will be described later in this article. The focus group involved 15 student participants who were asked (by an undergraduate research assistant who served as the moderator) questions about their goals and aspirations as well as the learning and studying habits they employ. Examples of some of the questions that were posed include:

What are the key factors that motivate you to attend your classes regularly? What factors act as disincentives to attending classes regularly?

Do you typically do all of the assigned readings in your classes? Why or why not?

What are the main reasons that you are in college? What do you hope to gain or get out of your college experience?

The qualitative data generated by the focus group were analyzed by means of content analysis. Themes and patterns that emerged in those data, combined with material I have read and studied about the Millennial Generation (in both popular and scholarly publications), form the basis for the following assertions and perspectives.

### **Comparing and Contrasting Xers and Millennials**

It is a gross generalization to refer to a “generational character,” but scholars and pundits do so in an attempt to understand some common traits and attitudes exhibited among members of particular generations. We know that not all Baby Boomers were anti-war activists, and not all Gen Xers were slackers. In the same way, traits ascribed to the Millennials are generalizations that certainly won’t apply to every individual.

Generation Xers experienced few, if any, defining events in their formative years. In the shadow of the Baby Boomers, the Xers suffered from a generational identity crisis. That claim can be challenged, of course, but the label of “X” certainly casts the generation as one lacking identity and character. Our current generation of students, known by names such as “Generation Y”, “the Millennial Generation”, “Digital Natives”, “the Net Generation”, as well as “Generation Me”, clearly has defining events. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack is a major marker of the generation. Other key events include Hurricane Katrina, the war in Iraq and in Afghanistan, and heightened attention to the effects of global warming. Additionally, as Joshua Glenn (2008), notes:

Millennials have come of age during the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations...The New Economy boomed and went bust. Broadband Internet, mobile phones, digital cameras, MP3 players, email, and the management of one’s social life via networking software ceased to be luxuries and became necessities for younger Americans.

While Xers were faced with the likelihood that they would not experience upward social mobility, many Millennials are simply not willing to settle for less when it comes to jobs and salaries. As Millennial generation workers occupy the workplace in large numbers, we find a cohort of workers unwilling to

commit their loyalties to the boss. Less inclined to stay in unpleasant, conflict-filled, or boring workplaces, they appear poised to change jobs when something better comes along. Millennials may be ushering in new visions of the workplace. In their recent book, *Work Sucks*, Ressler and Thompson (2008) advocate for a Results-Only Work Environment, which allows for employees to deviate from the traditional 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. work schedule, miss meetings, and simply spend less time at the workplace – as long as the work does get done. Less “face time” appeals to the Millennial worker, who is accustomed to working via the laptop or BlackBerry in settings as varied as home, the coffee shop, or the subway.

Members of Generation X and the Millennial Generation are quite racially and culturally diverse. In general, members of these generations are considered tolerant and open. Anna Quindlen (2000) observes this about the Millennials:

One out of every seven of their peers is black, one out of every seven Latino, and because of that great diversity of population as well as greater openness at school and at home they do not have the lily-white illusions that colored my insular childhood, nor some of the fears of the other that have poisoned our national discourse. They have grown up seeing, and believing, that women are as capable as men...As this generation grows to adulthood it becomes ever less necessary for gay men and lesbians to follow the old conventions of deception.

The fact that the 2008 presidential democratic race was between a woman, Hillary Clinton, and an African-American, Barack Obama, illustrates growth and movement of this sort on the national stage.

Parents of the kids in both generations relied heavily upon daycare, although we heard more about latchkey children in the 1980s and 1990s. Gen Xers experienced less supervision than have Millennials. As students, Gen Xers were viewed as largely on their own. Independent, nonconformist, and rebellious are apt adjectives to describe many members of Generation X. In the words of Howe and Strauss (2003), the Gen Xer is a “scrappy, pragmatic, free-agent” (Howe and Strauss, 13). The Millennials, on the other hand, are the children of “helicopter parents”. These parents are over-involved, intrusive, and protective. Howe and Strauss identify the Millennials as “the most watched-over generation in memory.” They note: “The typical day of a child, tween or teen has become a nonstop round of parents, relatives, teachers, coaches, babysitters, counselors, chaperones, minivans, surveillance cams and curfews”. A way in which this is evidenced on college campuses is in the phone calls that professors and administrators receive from parents checking on their kids. Such calls often involve questioning of why their children aren’t getting better grades, with parents defending their children and questioning what

is going awry at the institution that would explain the trouble their children may be having there. A colleague of mine who works in advising told me about a phone call she received from a parent; the question the parent had was this: "Do you provide a wake-up call service there for the students?" My colleague's response was: "No. This isn't a hotel!"

The younger Gen Xers were considered to be comfortable with emerging technologies and eager to bring their skills, tools, and ideas into the workplace. For the Millennials, the rapidity of technological changes has been astounding. But, this has been their reality, and thus such changes have been "normal" for this generation. They experienced regular cell phones turn into having the capability of being camera phones; cd players giving way to MP3 players; communicating by email and instant messaging being trumped by communicating via Facebook and MySpace.

The listening (and viewing) of music for Gen Xers was affected by the birth of MTV; for Millennials the ipod has revolutionized their experiences with music. Again heeding the dangers involved in generalizing, if we *were* to make a statement about what type of music seemed to best capture the mood and attitude of Generation X, we would say that it was grunge. For Millennials, who have especially eclectic tastes, the generalization is even more difficult. This generation is somewhat represented by EMO (emotional rock), but musical preferences are really all over the map. In recent years, hip-hop has been especially popular among members of this generation.

During the 1990s, social psychologists wrote about "the saturated self" (Gergen 1991), in reference to identity in the postmodern era characterized by fragmentation, incoherence, and instability. The availability of new communication technologies and a bombardment of social stimuli were said to threaten the notion of a stable, authentic self. In my social psychology classes, when I discuss the concepts of the saturated self and the mutable self, I am now finding that these terms do not seem to provoke much concern or interest among the Millennials. Their "selves" may be saturated, but they don't recognize it because this has been their experience since day one. The self in flux is normative for them. Thus, my "modern" notions of what is involved in constructing a coherent self and maintaining continuity of identity in these postmodern times (and the assertion that this is an important task for each of us) may not be viewed as a worthwhile or necessarily relevant topic of study among this generation of students.

The Millennial Generation is, in many ways, a generation of contrasts – e.g., they are both team-oriented and narcissistic; they are said to be optimistic, yet also cynical; they do volunteer activities but the motives are unclear: Is the volunteer work because they want to give of themselves selflessly and help others, or is it more about padding a resume? (Teens are now beginning to construct resumes in high school!) Furthermore, such volunteer activities are mandatory in some schools and colleges. We all probably have numerous anecdotes of Millennials displaying disrespectful behavior toward those in authority, yet they report admiration for their parents and are apt to adopt their parents' ideological views rather than rebel against them. Indeed, many Millennials have a "friendship" with their parents rather than the traditional parent-child hierarchical relationship. Reporter Cecelia Goodnow quotes teen researcher and president of GTR Consulting, Gary Rudman, who said this about the Millennials: "The trend is that there isn't a trend. This generation is all about choice – being able to find something and make it your own." (Goodnow, 1) Such contradictory ideas about the Millennials make it more difficult to easily categorize and label the generation. Of course we know that labels and categories are always oversimplifications, so more power to the Millennials!

### **Millennials in the College Classroom**

#### Challenges for both students and instructors

As already noted, I recently had the opportunity to participate in a University of Minnesota Bush Foundation Grant, the general subject of which was to enhance students' self-regulation and motivation and to develop reflexive practitioners. The primary objective of my study was to find constructive ways to ensure that students do the assigned readings in their classes. In recent years, I have been amazed at the extent to which many college students do not do all of the assigned reading in their classes (sometimes not even obtaining the books for their courses). I would like to arrive at means of encouraging students to do the required reading in ways that are supportive and positive, rather than relying upon fear tactics. First, I need to understand where the students are coming from and what obstacles or disincentives may be involved in whether or not they complete assigned reading in their courses. I wish to share some observations based on my work related to this grant. I believe that these observations, in conjunction with the work of others who are studying the Millennials, can help to enhance our understanding of today's students.

First, some results of informal data gathering I did in my Social Psychology class a few semesters ago reveal attitudes that may strike a chord with what other instructors are seeing in their students. I asked the class if they were familiar with the book, *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* by “Rebekah Nathan” (pseudonym), actually written by anthropologist Cathy Small, who became a freshman student at the university where she teaches. In essence, this is an ethnographic study of college freshman culture at a particular university. The students were not familiar with this book. I shared with them the following passage from the book: “Students mentally ask themselves a series of questions, so as to decide whether they should do the required reading in their courses:

‘Will there be a test or quiz on the material?’

‘Is the reading something that I will need in order to be able to do the homework?’

‘Will we directly discuss this in class in such a way that I am likely to have to personally and publicly respond or otherwise “perform” in relation to this reading?’ ”

The author notes that, if the answer to all of these questions is “no,” then students don’t do the reading, or at least the probability of them not doing the reading is much higher (p. 138). I asked my students for their thoughts and reactions to this finding or assertion of the author. One student said that if the instructor is assigning reading material that is not covered on a test or in some way covered in the class, then the instructor should not be requiring it. (I suggested that instructors may recommend reading that is relevant to the subject matter of the class, such that reading it will enrich learning. This did not receive any kind of response from the group). Another student noted that if a book is boring, then she simply does not read it. One student indicated that if students will be expected to discuss reading material in the class, then this will motivate them to read. On the other hand, if the only way that their not reading the material will be reflected is through their performance on a test or quiz, then this is less of a motivator because it is private as opposed to public. One other individual said that if professors go over material in the classroom that duplicates what the textbook covers, then students do not view the reading as necessary. To summarize, then, the following are disincentives to reading (at least among this particular group of students and also among the subjects in Small’s study): a) the material is boring, b) the material is not covered on quizzes or tests, c) the students are not required to discuss the material in class, and d) the in-class lectures duplicate the reading.

Results from a focus group conducted with 15 student participants at the university where I teach, moderated by an undergraduate research assistant (I played the role of “observer/note-taker”), uncovered similar sentiments. Students indicated that they will more likely read the material if they know they will need to participate in class discussion on the basis of the reading. The students identified the following disincentives for reading: the textbook is written in a way that is hard to get through (“some are just written like crap”), the professor doesn’t test on what is in the book, and the reading is not directly tied into what is discussed in class. The focus group participants were asked the reasons they are in college, and many of them responded by saying that it was expected; the next step after high school. One student, clearly aware of privileges afforded him due to his social class location, observed: “I am from a white, suburban family. I had the option of going to college.” The majority of responses focused on college being a vehicle for a better job and making more money.

Incidentally, back in 1999, I collected data from a convenience sample of 154 undergraduate students (i.e., primarily Gen Xers). One of the questionnaire items was, “What are the main reasons that you are in college?” The most common responses revolved around getting an education as a preparation for a meaningful career. But the following comments reflect goals or motives that are more in synch with what many of us feel is the mission of a liberal arts education:

“To get an education, broaden my knowledge, and gain independence.”

“To learn, to be opened to ideas I might not find on my own.”

“I think college is a time to cement social relationships and find out who you are and where you want to go in life.”

“To find myself and to educate myself – in that order.”

“To meet new people and expand my intellect.”

“To gain a wide range of useful knowledge and to ‘think the deep thoughts’.

“To obtain a higher education that will benefit my moral, spiritual and financial future.”

Certainly, there are myriad reasons our students are in college, but the pursuits of expanding one’s intellect, finding oneself, or positively affecting one’s morality do not appear to be all that prevalent among many members of the current generation. A big obstacle is that it seems as if learning in the college setting is not considered all that meaningful to many Millennial students. There is great emphasis on

“getting the degree” rather than on the process or experience of being a college student. In some cases, parents may contribute to this emphasis on “getting through,” “getting done,” “getting a job.” Given college costs, there is a lot of pressure on students to complete the degree as quickly as possible and get a good job that pays well. Parents are ever aware of the economic realities facing their children. Although it sounds cliché, it is indeed the case that the rich are getting richer, and the middle class is getting increasingly squeezed. Part of the motivation of “helicopter parents” is to do what they can to give their children an edge in a highly competitive environment. Bringing this back to what we attempt to do in the college setting, though, we realize that to the extent that the college experience is viewed as a means to this end – i.e., to “the JOB” – rather than as an end in itself, true learning and the real meaning of what many of us feel college is all about is potentially lost. Certainly, there are real, practical concerns and considerations – students DO pay a lot of tuition and incur huge amounts of debt; they want to know that getting the college degree is going to help them secure good employment. If this is the primary goal or idea about college, then it seems to invite a student perspective that is not consistent with what it means to be in a community of learners.

Another significant (and related) obstacle, of course, is the fact that many of our students work at jobs that end up competing for their time. Students need to learn how to best manage their time and how to prioritize their school and work obligations. As instructors, we may indeed be understanding of the challenges our students face (with respect, for example, to the incurring of huge debt and the attempt to manage and balance everything they have going on), yet we must be careful not to compromise standards and expectations. Each instructor must arrive at particular strategies and approaches for reaching the students and nurturing a positive learning environment. As we work on being more reflective in what we do as instructors, we can model this for our students who will become more reflective themselves. This may, in part, help to facilitate students’ taking more responsibility for their learning. On one level, this could mean that students read the required books for their courses. On another level, it could mean that students appreciate the intrinsic value of what it means to be immersed in the college setting.

### How to connect with such “connected” students

The ubiquity of cell phones and ipods among our students raise legitimate questions about the effect on attention span and entertainment expectations (as well as ways that technological gadgets provide new and clever vehicles for cheating). Some experts even assert that engagement with all of this technology alters the brain. What are the pedagogical implications? Certainly, instructors have increasingly felt the pressure to make the classroom environment entertaining and fun in an attempt to keep students' attention and interest. To accommodate the demand many students have for rapid response, some instructors (especially in large lecture courses) are now using “clickers”, which allow students to respond to a quick poll in class or take practice tests the instructor administers. And they get immediate results. This demand for immediacy, in general, is posing potential misunderstandings between instructors and students. When a student calls or emails a professor, there seems to be an expectation that the professor will respond almost instantaneously. This suggests an expectation of “customer service”, which typically does not match the ways in which instructors at colleges and universities envision academe. Certainly, this is an area where instructors and students need to attempt taking the role of the other. Differing expectations need to be communicated in order to make understanding and negotiation possible.

New technologies allow for people to be expressive and creative in ways that were unimaginable in the past. Some instructors are providing their students opportunities to use the mediums they are comfortable and familiar with in particular class assignments. This might mean students turn in a video-documentary, create a website, or maintain a blog. Experiential activities, opportunities for creative use of available technologies, and a learning environment that is entertaining and exciting are typically preferred over and above traditional lecture formats in classes.

### **Future Directions**

Where do we go from here? Additional studies need to be conducted which will test some of the implied propositions suggested here and elsewhere. We must be cautious about generalizing from non-probability samples. It would be especially helpful, I think, for researchers to consider how social class shapes the experiences and expectations of members of the Millennial generation. Much of the existing research clearly has a middle/upper-middle class bias.

An issue that has obvious relevance for college professors is what kind of pedagogy works best for the Millennial student. But, in considering this, we must also ask: How much should professors be expected to change how they teach? What is reasonable? If professors accommodate the Millennial students by incorporating more technology, less traditional lecture, and greater opportunity for experiential learning, is something also lost? If so, does it matter?

Much attention has been given to the role of technology among Millennials. We must continue to examine how certain technological tools both help and hinder individuals' ability to communicate. More particularly, how does the heavy reliance upon email and texting impact one's ability to effectively communicate face-to-face? Are appendages like cell phones and ipods resulting in the alienation of oneself from the ongoing social process of which we are all a part? What are individual and social consequences of this phenomenon?

We can anticipate that there will be additional research and speculation on the ways in which work place culture(s) will be affected by Millennials entering the work force in greater numbers. When this was the case for Gen Xers, some employers hired consultants with the objective of helping Boomers and Xers better understand each other and thereby work more productively and harmoniously.

### **Closing Words**

Learning more about where students are at – their perceptions of college, future goals, and attitudes toward the college learning environment – should help instructors to know what they are dealing with, and what pedagogical techniques may work best. When the media, pundits, and professors criticized Generation Xers in the 1990s, this seemed to be done largely without consideration of the social, economic, and cultural factors affecting and shaping the Xers. We are in danger of doing this again with the Millennial Generation. While we may be inclined to fall into judgmental commentary on “kids these days” or “this generation”, we would do well to place the Millennials, contextualize their coming of age, and work toward enhanced understanding. Realities of the competition in both micro (e.g., community, school, college) and macro (American society and the world community) environments, the cultural milieu of consumerism, and the revolutionizing aspects of new technologies are significant factors influencing both the parents of Millennials and the Millennials themselves.

I feel that my participation in the Bush Foundation grant project, in conjunction with general observations of Millennials in college, reading books and articles about the generation, attending workshops (and having a Millennial step-son!) is helping me gain some insight on and understanding of forces shaping Millennials. By becoming more aware of and sensitive to the goals, aspirations, and expectations Millennials may have, we can better face the challenges those of us in older generations experience in attempting to best equip them with what they need as they enter the work force and become active citizens in the world.

## References

- Glenn, J. 2008. The millennials, 1984-1993. Retrieved from [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/brainiac/2008/04/the\\_millennials.html](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/brainiac/2008/04/the_millennials.html)
- Goodnow, C. March 2007. " 'Millennials' thrive on choice, instant results" *Seattle Post Intelligencer*. Retrieved from [http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/lifestyle/307124\\_millennial13.html](http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/lifestyle/307124_millennial13.html)
- Howe, N. & Strauss, W. 2003. *Millennials go to college*. American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers and LifeCourse Associates.
- Howe, N. & Strauss, W. 2000. *Millennials rising: The next great generation*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Nathan, R. (pseudo-name; real name is Small, C.A.). 2005. *My freshman year: What a professor learned by becoming a student*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Prensky, M. 2001. "Digital natives, digital immigrants." *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5.
- Ressler, C. and Thompson, J. 2008. Why work sucks and how to fix it: No schedules, no meetings, no joke--The big idea that's already transforming the way we work. Portfolio.
- Twenge, J. M. 2006. *Generation me: Why today's young Americans are more confident, assertive, entitled – and more miserable than ever*. New York: Free Press.

---

<sup>i</sup> In an article that I wrote in 1998, "Generation X: Who Are They? What Do They Want?" (published in *Thought & Action*), I attempted to dispel some myths about Gen Xers, provide insight into how certain factors have shaped the generation, and give a glimpse into some of the frustrations and motivations of Gen Xers.