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***Recognizing College Students of Today:
Generational Shifts Prompt Pedagogical Shifts***

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ABSTRACT

As educators strive to continually improve the learning potential of the students in our classrooms, it is wise to evaluate traits of the students that may influence the effectiveness of the pedagogical methods employed. To this end, this essay introduces the reader to descriptions of today's college students that identify this cohort as unique in learning style as well as life experience from all previous generations. An assessment method was used to investigate the degree to which current students identify with these generational stereotypes. The method and results of the assessment are discussed, and suggestions for adopting new pedagogical strategies for teaching these students are offered. The essay concludes with suggestions for future research into the pedagogical methods that may better serve this cohort of students.

In February of 2006, a Basic Course Director's Conference was held in Fargo, North Dakota. The keynote address, delivered by Dr. Mark Taylor, M.S.W. Ed.D.(Director of Guidance Services at Arkansas State University-Beebe), focused on the presence of a new generation of students on campuses since the turn of the millennium and how the presence of these students in the classroom precipitates a need for change in current pedagogy practices. Shortly following this conference, in an issue of *Spectra* (April 2006), an article appeared titled "How do we communicate with 'Millennials?'" Millennials, a name coined by Howe & Strauss (1991), is but one name being used to describe this new generation of students; more recently other names, such as Generation NeXt, Gen Y, and Gen M, have been used to refer to these same individuals. Although the names have changed, the importance of the characteristics of this generation of students should not be overlooked.

Discussion of the characteristics of students (born in 1980 or later) in college classrooms today is warranted for a number of reasons. First, this new generation of students has been identified as notably different learners from previous generations (McGlynn, 2005; Oblinger, 2003; Taylor, 2004). Second, if educators aim to increase critical thinking skills and improve learning outcomes among these students, then teachers need to actively address the characteristics that make these students unique with regard to previous generations (Gardiner, 1994; Oblinger, 2003; Taylor, 2004). And, third, the seriousness of this topic needs to be

disseminated among a wider audience to prompt educators to discuss the pedagogical strategies that may be most successful with this new generation of learners.

The overall goal of this essay is to focus the attention of educators on characteristics associated with this generation of students relevant to pedagogy in secondary and post-secondary classrooms. To this end, the reader is introduced to characteristic traits of this new cohort, and offered pedagogical strategies that may enhance learning within the classroom environment. The essay closes with suggestions for further investigations on this topic.

Recognizing a New Generation of Students

With the onset of the 21st century, a distinct new generation of students was predicted to hit college campuses nationwide. This cohort of students has grown up in a period of national economic prosperity and government security, and is often identified as being doted on by parents whom often included them in family decision-making processes (Oblinger, 2003; Tucker, 2006). Verhaagen (2005) argues this generation has the potential to outshine all previous generations through their courage, character, determination, innovation, and vision.

Yet, problems with these descriptions arise when attempts are made to connect specific characteristics of this new generation to student learning and behavior practices in the classroom (e.g., Raines, 2002; Taylor, 2006). Intra-generational differences are becoming more apparent due to a seeming divide in the cohort, resulting in identifiable subgroups. When linked to pedagogy, educators should be aware of the various generational subgroups to fully comprehend the role these groups are playing in the adaptation of new pedagogical techniques within our discipline today.

Comparing Generational Subgroups: Millennial vs. Generation NeXt

During his 2006 presentation in Fargo, Dr. Taylor compared the characteristics associated with the predicted “Millennial” and currently realized “Generation NeXt” student population and drew the following conclusions. To distinguish between the Millennials and Generation NeXt students, it is important to keep in mind that each label refers to the same generational cohort of students; however, the associated characteristics appear to be polar opposites. While Millennial students were expected to be extremely focused on grades and performance (Raines, 2002; Tucker, 2006), Generation NeXt students are less studious than previous generations and particularly noted for reporting greater levels of boredom and tardiness in class and for perceiving themselves as better students than their college grade performance would indicate (Taylor, 2005, 2006). While it was anticipated that the Millennials would be willing to conform to convention, and respect norms and institutions (Raines, 2002; Tucker, 2006), the Generation NeXt students are noted for high levels of incivility, low levels of conventional conformity and civic activity, and weak association with traditional social structures (Taylor, 2005, 2006). While the Millennials were predicted to be more interested in math and science, the Generation

NeXt students are not showing great interest in math, science, or the humanities (Taylor, 2005, 2006). Lastly, while the Millennials were predicted to seek a secure, predictable environment, the Generation NeXt students are noted to seek environments that allow for their individual freedom involving personal behavior and choices (Taylor, 2005, 2006). Conversely, characteristics shared by both Millennial and Generation Next students include a close relationship with parents, technological sophistication, ethnic diversity, and a majority of females over males (Jayson, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Tucker, 2006).

Examining the differences between Millennial and Generation NeXt subgroups. In light of the comparison between Millennial and Generation NeXt students, Taylor (2006) offered some theories as to why these subgroups may have formed. Social and economic contextual factors, Taylor argued, have heavily contributed to the generation's characteristics. For example, in his keynote address at the conference, Taylor argued that traditionally-aged students' critical thinking skills and attitudes regarding education have been more influenced by personal opinion and consumer interest, than by the traditional religious or scientific values influential in previous generations. From a postmodern perspective, he argued Generation NeXt students may see reality as individually and socially constructed, which has the effect of prioritizing opinion and personal preference over truth and absolute meaning in daily decision-making. From a sociological perspective, Taylor argued Generation NeXt students have been witness to dynamic social shifts, such as large numbers of mothers joining the workforce, an equal occurrence of divorce and marriage, a shift of parental role-models to include daycare and educational staff members, and, as a group, have experienced an increasing reliance on television for social information and entertainment. Taylor argued all of these contextual factors are at work shaping the characteristics of Generation NeXt students entering college today.

Interestingly, Taylor's perspective is not always represented in the work written up on this new generation (Raines, 2002; McGlynn, 2005; Oblinger, 2003). As convincing as Taylor's (2004, 2006) argument is, it is with care that any generalization should be applied to a group of students. Keeping this in mind, it is important to acknowledge the potential for this new generation of students to have differing motivations and goals regarding their post-secondary educations. As a result, a classroom may consist of a combination of Millennial and Generation NeXt students. What seems most important, then, is to devise ways for identifying the types of students present in the classroom and also how to best teach to the mix that one finds.

Fostering More Learning via New Teaching Strategies

Previous college generations were often taught through lecture-driven teaching methods, referred to today as passive teaching strategies (Gardiner, 1994). Although current pedagogy practices espouse a need for active strategies to replace these passive methods (Bain, 2004; Fink, 2003; Weimer, 2002), it is even more vital that attention be drawn to this pedagogical shift in light of the interpreted difference in characteristics of the subgroups of the new student

generation. Thus, being able to identify what type of student is sitting in the classroom, in addition to accurately implementing a relevant teaching method, is essential to enhancing learning outcomes among the college students of today. As a result, educators may need to investigate the generational stereotypes that are being used to characterize students today by asking students questions such as:

RQ1: What is your overall reaction to the label “Generation NeXt?”

RQ2: Which Generation NeXt characteristics do/do not “fit” when you think of yourself?

RQ3: What strategies could educators employ to best meet your needs in the classroom?

Method & Results

Assessments are a common way to gather information from students, and can help to identify the degree to which students in a course accept or reject the characteristics identified within a stereotype, such as “Generation NeXt.” Following is a description of an assessment method that was used to identify if students related to the Generation NeXt stereotype. Based on the results of using the assessment in class, suggestions for implementing pedagogical strategies to better suit the learning needs of the students are reviewed.

Administering the Assessment

A formal and informal assessment was administered during the 2006 spring semester in a university-level basic interpersonal communication course. The course enrollment was 23, with 19 students (6 female, 13 male) in attendance the day the assessment was administered. The assessment involved having students read an essay by Taylor (2004) titled, “Generation NeXt: Today’s Postmodern Student – Meeting, Teaching, and Serving.” After reading the essay, each student was asked to respond in written form to the three research questions noted above (formal assessment), and then was asked to engage in a class discussion of his/her responses to the questions (informal assessment). While this was a class assignment, permission was gained from each student to use their responses in the form(s) of an academic paper and/or presentation to advance research investigating this topic.

Gleaning Information from the Assessment

Regarding the first research question, 17 of the 19 students completing the assessment fit the Generation NeXt age-demographic, and all 17 overwhelmingly reported that they recognized and identified with at least some of the stereotypical characteristics Taylor (2004) used to describe the Generation NeXt student. See Table 1 for examples of the student responses to the first research question.

Table 1**RQ1: Student Assessment Responses to Generation NeXt Label**

“I think that the characteristics of GenNext are pretty much right on.”

“I believe that the characteristics are very accurate.”

“Many of these labels are shockingly true.”

“I feel like a lot of it is true.”

“I agree with Dr. Taylor. I’m surprised he has such a clear picture of the next generation.”

“I feel that a lot of this is true with our generation. I know that some of them apply to me.”

“My reaction to the label and characteristics of GenNext is positive because everything written on the handout is true.”

“It is very true that today education is viewed as a commodity to be consumed, acquired, and accumulated and not as a personal transformational process.”

Regarding the second research question, while students generally identified at varying levels with the Generation NeXt characteristics, some students believed only particular characteristics were applicable to their generation and that the overall generalizations were a bit too harsh. See Table 2 for examples of student responses to the second research question.

Table 2**RQ2: Student Assessment Responses to Specific Generation NeXt Characteristics**

“There are some portions of these characteristics that are completely off. Within each person there is an anomaly that doesn’t fit in any category that Mark Taylor listed.”

“I don’t agree with the whole instant gratification. I don’t think that I need instant gratification.”

“I think that our generation is really lazy but I don’t think it is all our fault. This is the way we were raised and if you aren’t like this you’re probably considered an outsider.”

“I don’t think all of it applies to everyone, but I know that some of them apply to me.”

Regarding the third research question, the overall responses provided by the students in the formal and informal assessments suggest that building critical thinking skills, empowering students to learn, and emphasizing basic skills would be beneficial areas of pedagogical focus. For example, students suggested that educators needed to engage their students in more critical thinking exercises. An approach that may help achieve this goal was offered by one participant:

“...give students projects with little guidance the first time so they have to think for themselves and outside the box. Then give them the project back with pointers so that they can redo it and turn it in a second time for a better grade.”

This will make students express themselves more and teachers will not have fifty projects that are all the same, every time.”

Students also noted that higher quality standards should be set in the classroom in an effort to encourage students to produce higher quality assignments. One student suggested teachers “...reward for excellence instead of effort. In other words, a student shouldn’t get a good grade just for showing up.” Lastly, students indicated that they wanted to learn in realistic environments. Be it outside of the classroom or by bringing in applicable speakers, students adamantly expressed the need for hands-on, real-life learning experiences that would help them practice and hone basic communication skills.

Adopting New Pedagogy Practices Based on Assessment Information

After assessing student identification with the characteristics reflective of the Generation NeXt student population, decisions can be made to employ teaching strategies designed to enhance student learning potential. There is overwhelmingly strong support for active and hands-on learning experiences in the literature (Oblinger, 2003; Olsen, 2005; Taylor, 2004, 2006; Tucker, 2006). If Generation NeXt student characteristics are reflected in the assessment responses collected from students, an educator may want to consider adopting pedagogical strategies noted to be more successful with this new generation of students. See Table 3 for a list of pedagogical methods provided by Taylor (2006) to enhance student participation and interest in classroom activities.

Related to the communication classroom in which the described assessment was administered, specific strategies that could be employed to increase participation and enhance critical learning include the use of regular quizzes to assess general knowledge acquisition regarding course content, the integration of the internet and implementation of video/audio methods to disseminate course content and feedback on assignments, and the infusion of interactive activities into the more traditional “passive” lecture.

The first strategy, regular quizzing, may hold students more accountable to course work expected to be accomplished outside of the classroom, so that valuable class time is available for exercises and activities. The second strategy aims at Taylor’s (2006) suggestion to build technological sophistication into course delivery. At times it can be challenging enough to get a room full of students to engage in discussion of course content, however, these attempts are especially difficult when students come to class unprepared. Technological integration within a course may serve as a means of satisfying student’s technological needs and appeal to the perceived credibility these students associate with the use of technology in the learning process, which may foster greater interaction with course material outside of class.

For example, to combine the first and second strategy, quizzes, blogs or other electronic assignments could be administered in an online format so that students could interact technologically while working to better understand content on their own time. Consequently, the creative door stands open to the teachers who are willing to explore unknown territory with

technologies in the classroom and try new strategies to incorporate multiple senses in the learning process.

Table 3

Postmodern Education for Generation NeXt (Taylor, 2006, pp. 103-105)

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1. Establish clear expectations, and communicate these expectations early and often.
 2. Be consistent.
 3. Articulate all desired outcomes.
 4. Develop meaningful citizenship and character development goals and activities.
 5. Stress the role of the scientific method in understanding, as well as the potential abuses of science and data.
 6. Move to a learning-centered academic paradigm.
 7. Use active and creative methods to facilitate significant learning experiences.
 8. Teach “up” educational taxonomies.
 9. Provide meaning through real-life application.
 10. Avoid the expectation of blind acceptance of academic authority.
 11. Maintain technological sophistication.
 12. Expand the parameters for class projects from the traditional paper to other types of demonstrations of research and learning.
 13. Offer many opportunities for interpersonal involvement.
 14. Appreciate diverse viewpoints.
 15. Increase flexibility in course schedules, semesters, and in entry and exit.
 16. Recognize trust and safety issues.
 17. Moderate a customer-based service model.
 18. Develop student services and programming based on institutional and student needs.
 19. Lighten up.
 20. Expect their best.
-

The third and last strategy suggests students leave their textbooks at home, with the expectation that students will be held accountable to read the text before coming to class. Instead of just repeating the content of the text, incorporate examples and illustrations from real life sources (e.g., articles, newspapers, websites, books, real interactions with others, participation in community events, service-learning assignments) that will inspire students to do more of the in-class talking and constructing of knowledge as they experience the material directly. This does not imply that textbooks are not necessary or useful, but that class time may be better utilized by incorporating higher standards for students to use the textbook outside of class, and focus class time interaction on application exercises.

Future Directions

Besides helping teachers recognize the presence of this new generation of student characteristics in their classrooms and offering some initial ideas for teaching strategies to enhance these students' learning outcomes, an underlying goal of this essay was to also bring to light the need for more research to be completed in this area of the communication field. Educators across the state are interested in addressing issues that influence student learning outcomes, and the communication discipline is well suited to pursue collaborative research into pedagogical methods. Some fruitful directions for future work include examining the relationships between student and teacher perceptions of "postmodern" (Taylor, 2006) teaching strategies, amount learned (both perceived and real) in classrooms implementing postmodern teaching strategies, and amount learned in classrooms employing more passive teaching strategies. A noteworthy construct that has received attention from scholars in the field over the past 15 years related to pedagogy is immediacy, which may offer more insight into the effectiveness of new teaching methods. In addition, a student's attitudes and beliefs as they are related to his/her degree of identification with these generational stereotypes should be included as a dimension of future work investigating this topic.

Conclusion

While labels and stereotypes provide generalizations that can be used to describe a group of individuals sharing similar characteristics, it is important to acknowledge that not all college students identify with the generational descriptions reviewed. Thus, a guarded use of the described characteristics should be applied. What appear to be more applicable to college students today are the assumptions students bring to the classroom that associate technology and interaction as inherent components of the learning process. Pedagogically, it seems we are in a stage of transition that requires us to build our awareness of these assumptions and consider the impact student characteristics may have on shaping the pedagogical strategies educators use in the future.

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