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Cultural Awareness Training: Preparing New Instructors for the Millennial Student

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It is not unusual for instructors to face challenges relating to, understanding, or motivating their students. Educators can chalk this up to a variety of factors, including differences in and between education levels, life experiences, and ascribed power roles. We argue, however, that it is the generational differences between instructors and their students that pose a much greater challenge toward the establishment of a productive teacher-student relationship and the facilitation of learning. With the age of the Millennial college student upon us, we make the case that the most important area of training for new instructors is developing cultural awareness about the Millennial generation. As McGlynn (2005) said, “facilitating learning involves understanding who our students are” (p. 12). As such, we believe it is essential for new, and seasoned, instructors to learn about the social, cultural and environmental factors that shape the Millennial learner (Roberts, Newman, & Schwartzstein, 2012). In the following pages, we hope to inspire cultural curiosity through highlighting Millennial characteristics and recommending tools for developing cultural awareness in new college instructors.

THE MILLENNIAL LEARNER

Millennials were born roughly between 1982 and 2002 (McAlister, 2009). As students, Millennials have been described as overly confident, narcissistic, sheltered, entitled, and lacking empathy (Dolby, 2014; McAlister, 2009; Twenge, 2009). Stewart's (2009) article, in particular, storied the culture shock he experienced coming back to the classroom after spending 15 years as an administrator. He described the warnings he received from his colleagues about teaching Millennial students, among them, "today's students are not the kinds of students you taught!" (Stewart, 2009, p. 111). This caution captures both the generational and cultural gaps that educators frequently experience when classroom personalities and/or student learning styles do not match their own expectations. Often, this culture shock occurs for instructors as a result of comparing their own educational experiences to current generational trends. However, with a developed awareness of the social factors that influence Millennial personalities and learning styles, new (and returning) instructors may be better equipped to manage this culture shock.

Like all generations, Millennials prioritize certain values over others. Perhaps the most obvious and distinguishing characteristic that separates Millennials from other generations is their dependence on technology (Dolby, 2014). Considered to be highly technologically savvy, Millennials are referred to as true "digital natives" (McAlister, 2009). Coming of age in an era of rapid technological advancement and increased Internet access, Millennials are the first generation to be exposed

to multiple forms of media throughout childhood. As a result, “today's students communicate and think differently than the students of previous generations because of the central position of technology in their lives” (Nicolletti & Merriman, 2007, p. 30). From an educational stance, it is essential to acknowledge and understand how Millennials engage with technology in order to modify our course curriculum as a practice of cultural adaptation.

To Millennials, technology affords them many advantages, including increased efficiency, enhanced relational development and maintenance with friends and family, and greater access and mobility overall (Dolby, 2014). Research shows that Millennial students view technology as a valuable tool for engaging in both social and academic/professional endeavors. Many educators argue that this excessive exposure and access to digital tools has created a generation of distracted multi-taskers who have short attention spans and an insatiable need for instant gratification (McAlister, 2009). Millennials also have a tendency to use trial by error learning to keep up with the rapid changes in technology. For example, they are much more likely to push several buttons on a new phone to figure out how it works, rather than read the instruction manual. These tactics transfer to the classroom. Because of their penchant for technology, Millennial students prefer, and come to expect, learning environments that incorporate multimedia through the use of videos and social media platforms (Nicolletti & Merriman, 2007). Additionally, as visual learners they tend to retain more information from visual cues than traditional text- and lecture-based learning methodologies. For educators, these charac-

teristics pose challenges and opportunities to the learning process, namely when it comes to retention, recall, maintaining student interest during class, and/or developing skill mastery through repeated exposure (McAlister, 2009).

Instructors must consider, then, how they can utilize various technologies as pedagogical tools, rather than view technology as a distraction to student learning. For example, educators may virtually connect with students using GoToMeeting software during office hours, or assign personal blog assignments as an exercise in public scholarship. In order to meet the visual preferences of our learners, instructors might consider posting a grading rubric in place of an assignment description, or assigning a collection of digital academic articles or websites instead of a book chapter. Of course, we are not suggesting that textbooks and/or more traditional pedagogical methods have outgrown their worth. Rather, integrating multimedia learning platforms may foster connections with Millennial students that influence student success.

In line with Millennials' preference for technology, they are also socially engaged individuals. Many of them had active childhoods with highly structured schedules that revolved around study groups, after-school programs, and sporting events (McAlister, 2009). As such, Millennials often thrive in structured, interactive environments that promote collaboration and team-based activities (McGlynn, 2005). They also appreciate practical application of course material through connecting curriculum to their personal and professional lives. Certainly, instructors who are trained to teach in traditional lecture-style methods may face challenges

maintaining the Millennial student's interest and attention. However, we suggest that instructors who are trained to develop interactive environments and practically applied curriculum may find higher success rates among their students (Roberts, Newman, Schwartzstein, 2012). For example, instructors in a business communication course might encourage students to develop an online resume through Wordpress software. Similarly, group communication instructors may experiment with using social media platforms to hold online discussion boards.

Beyond their technology use, Millennials' casual personalities often surprise and frustrate instructors. Millennials see less of a distinction between the role of student and teacher than members of past generations (McAlister, 2009). This generation also wants to know more about their instructors on a personal level and prefer more relaxed or informal educational environments. Parents of Millennials also raised their children to see themselves as unique and special (Harward, 2008). Described as the "Me Generation," Millennials want to be personally known by their instructors and respond well when they feel their uniqueness is confirmed and acknowledged in the classroom (Twenge, 2009). With a proclivity for narcissism, coupled with a highly commodified education system (i.e., the student is treated as "customer"), Millennials can easily become disgruntled when they feel unsupported by their instructors (Nilsen, 2010). This is especially true when they receive poor grades. All of these factors can create challenges in maintaining student trust, attention, and respect. With an understanding of these personality characteristics, however, new instructors may be more prepared to ef-

fectively manage classroom situations where their authority may be challenged.

Aside from personality, classroom issues may be more closely linked to a complex and policy-ridden public education system. Millennials have experienced the fallout of No Child Left Behind, inflated grading, fewer hours of homework, and rote memory teaching methods geared toward improving standardized testing scores (Twenge, 2009). As a result, students often lack the necessary critical thinking and writing skills to succeed in college (Nilsen, 2010). Furthermore, as the children of “helicopter parents,” they have rarely been allowed to fail and often receive high levels of praise and pressure to succeed from parents, teachers, and coaches throughout their childhoods (McAlister, 2009; Nilsen, 2010). They are often ill equipped to deal with failure and are simply “unprepared to deal with the mistakes they will make” (Harward, 2008, p. 66), despite receiving repeated messages from their parents that they can “do anything.”

Certainly, poor grades and difficulties meeting the demands of the college classroom could issue a blow to a student’s ego and self-esteem. Instructors, then, must be prepared to understand, manage, and diffuse heightened student emotions and demands. In this way, instructors take on new and shifting roles, acting not only as educators, but also as counselors and stewards of information. We believe it is essential to equip new instructors with the tools to navigate their changing roles, as well as train today’s educators to clearly communicate and develop appropriate boundaries with students. Some effective practices may be through clearly communicating course expectations and grading procedures,

developing solid grading rubrics, providing structure and direction in assignments, and directing students to additional resources available at the university (Nilsen, 2010; Roberts et al., 2012).

TRAINING IN ACTION

Taken together, the cultural and social factors that have shaped the average Millennial student provide insight to the struggles, attitudes, learning styles, perceptions, and expectations our students bring to the classroom. Instructors need to be educated about these changing demographics in order to create productive learning environments and develop healthy relationships with Millennial learners. As a multi-generational teaching team at a large university, we train new graduate instructors for their first experiences in the classroom through a semester long seminar titled New Graduate Instructor Orientation (NGIO).

Part of this training includes hosting a critical discussion about the characteristics of Millennial students, the challenges the new instructor might face in working with this population, and the ways in which higher education is shifting given the unique learning needs of the Millennials. We draw on our varying generational perspectives to help concretize the qualities and characteristics that distinguish different generations in educational settings. In practice, we frame this course much like “cultural sensitivity” training by encouraging new instructors to engage in a dialogue about the differences and similarities they share with their students and to exercise compassion and understanding in the place of frustration. This training serves to address and reframe

negative perspectives of the Millennial student population and develop awareness about the shifting climate of higher education. Furthermore, we seek to bring attention to changing demographics and Millennial student cultural values by engaging in practical and self-reflexive activities that seek to bridge the gap between past and present teaching methodologies (e.g., application-based and engaged pedagogy in place of lecture and text-based instruction). For example, we invite new instructors to brainstorm various pedagogical practices that encourage student engagement, promote group work, and/or implement the use of technology. These discussions and activities often lead to a broadened mindset about who our students are and how to promote student development in a rapidly evolving world.

It is evident that Millennial students possess a unique set of characteristics that require educators to adopt more interactive, engaged approaches to pedagogy. The traditional means of educating students in higher education (e.g., lecture formats, standardized testing, and textbook-centered instruction) simply do not meet the learning styles and/or needs of most Millennials. “American educators are dealing with this new generation of learners, who call for new ways of interacting, teaching and thinking about the learning process” (Nicoletti & Merriman, 2007, p. 31). As educators, we must first be willing to understand members of the Millennial culture in order to develop effective pedagogical strategies that meet the needs of our students. New instructors, then, should be equipped with information and tools that help them effectively engage Millennial students. Certainly, we are not the first, or likely the last, to acknowledge the challenges as well as

the possibilities associated with educating this generation (Roberts et al., 2012).

Although the discussion about Millennials in higher education has reduced to a simmer in recent years, we believe training on educating Millennial students remains an important endeavor. The youngest members of this generation are currently in junior high, which means Millennials will continue to filter through our college classrooms for at least another decade. They are also currently on track to become the most educated generation in history, further highlighting the need to understand how Millennial students engage in the learning process (Dolby, 2014). Despite the perceived, and possibly real, challenges associated with teaching Millennials, their entrance to higher education calls for a shift in the way we conceptualize education and learning. Rather than complain about Millennials' idiosyncrasies or lack of skills, we can embrace the new opportunities and insights they bring to the classroom. We are presented with an opportunity to re-envision our pedagogical goals and practices. Through continued dialogue, we can prepare the next group of college instructors to construct a positive learning environment for the modern student. Through cultural awareness, sensitivity, and updated pedagogical training, we can begin to appreciate our students for their ingenuity, connectedness, and curiosity. To be successful, though, we must meet them halfway.

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