EFFECTIVE LEARNING STYLES OF THE MILLENNIAL ADULT LEARNERS IN THE TECHNICAL COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT

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Suzanne M. Daly

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Abstract

EFFECTIVE LEARNING STYLES OF THE MILLENIAL ADULT LEARNERS IN THE
TECHNICAL COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT

Suzanne M. Daly

Under the Supervision of Tom LoGuidice, PhD
Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin-Platteville

Numerous negative stigmas have been placed on the millennial generation. This
generation of misunderstood adult learners has the additional challenge of being taught in the
technical college environment by instructors who don’t understand them, or are not willing to
adapt their teaching styles to accommodate these adult learners. This seminar paper includes an
outline of the generalized stereotypes of the millennial generation, explains the inaccuracy of
these stereotypes, and recommends non-traditional teaching methods that can be implemented by
instructors.
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Overview

In the learning environment of a technical college setting, there is a broad span of generational adult learners. This means that in the same learning environment, there can be traditional and non-traditional students ranging in age from 18 years old to 65 years old and older. Whereas some instructors may find this to be a tremendous opportunity to develop each generation of adult learners and help them understand each other’s histories and foundations of learning, other instructors may find this to be an obstacle greater than they are willing to embrace. To add another level of challenge to this learning environment, there can be a disconnection between the instructor’s generation and the adult learner’s generation. Traditional learning approaches that used to be appropriate and effective, are now met with apathy, defiance, indifference, disrespect, and no personal accountability for performance and grades (Roehling, Vander Kooi, Dykema, Quisenberry, & Vandlen, 2010). A misunderstood generation for many instructors at the technical college level is the millennial generation. These are, in most cases, traditional-aged adult learners born after 1982. (Twenge, 2006)

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed is, What are the most effective learning styles of the millennial generation, “Generation Y”, adult learners in the technical college environment, and how can these learning styles be incorporated into the classroom lab setting?
Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research paper is to provide a review of the information related to the multiple generations of adult learners in the technical college environment and focus on the distinctive and unique needs of the millennial generation student. Once the needs of this group of adult learners are recognized, the best teaching methods can be utilized to make these students successful learners.

Significance of the Study

For any instructor in the technical college setting, the ultimate goal is to educate or train students to be successful in their chosen profession. Understanding the specific learning needs and most effective approaches of teaching the diversity of students in a class will help facilitate the success of each student.

Definitions of Terms

Generation Y. This is referring to the generation born between 1980 and 1995. (Twenge, 2010)

Self-confidence. A generalized personality trait that relates to how confidently people feel and act in most situations. (Benfer & Shanahan, 2013)

Delimitations of Research

The references used for the review of literature were collected over a period of 60 days using the resources of the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and the library at Madison College. The several search engines provided by EBSCO Host were used. The search engine Eric was especially helpful. The key search terms were “millennial learner”, “learning styles”, “psychology”, “teaching styles”, “technical college”, and “millennial”.

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Method of Approach

A review of literature on the studies of the millennial generation and learning styles was conducted. The findings are summarized and recommendations made.
Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

Introduction

The newest generation of adult learners has lived an entitled life. Many see higher education as a commodity that can be bought. It is not uncommon for these students to come into the learning environment and believe that they have paid for their grades (Worley, 2011). This presents instructors with a challenge. How do you teach a generation of students who challenge their grades, assignments, and the teaching style that has worked so well with previous generations?

The History of Generations

In any classroom setting in a technical college environment, there is the probability that there will be many different generations of adult learners represented. Generations are not just classified according to the year in which the student is born, but according to where the student aligns in maturation and technological savvy (Tucker, 2006). A generation is categorized as 20 years in length. This interval represents the human lifespan as segmented into 4 phases: youth, rising adulthood, midlife, and elder hood (Strauss and Howe, 1991). Listed below are the categories of how generations are defined and what world events have influenced the learning of that particular generation (Worley, 2011).
<table>
<thead>
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<td>Baby Boomers: (1946-1964)</td>
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<td>Uncomfortable with technology</td>
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<td>Single parent families</td>
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<td>Monica Lewinsky scandal</td>
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<td>Clinton impeachment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>September 11, 2001</td>
<td>Diverse</td>
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<td>School shootings</td>
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<td>Iraq/Afghanistan wars</td>
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<td>Self-centered</td>
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Each generation is not only defined by their external influences, but students within that generation have their own personalities and how they view entering the workforce and the role that they play in being productive members of society (Ismail & Hoo, 2014). This is also called the “peer personality” or “world view” (Sandeen, 2008). The more instructors are able to understand and identify the attitudes, family roles, lifestyle, and cultural diversities of each generation, the more accurately an educational delivery system can be developed (Sandeen, 2008).

**The Millennial Generation**

Generation me, generation why, netgens, echo boomers, and the millennial generation (White & Kiegaldie, 2011). These terms are referring to the generation born between 1980 and 1995 (Twenge, 2010), or 1982 and 2002 (McAlister, 2009). This generation represents over 80 million people, or up to 30% of the U.S. population. (Tucker, 2006) Hearing the term “millennial” is enough to make some instructors cringe. This term, referring to the type of student that could be in class that semester, can evoke the following assumptions about that student: lazy, selfish, entitled, non-motivated, disrespectful, needy, no common sense, no personal responsibility or accountability, social-media obsessed, apathetic, do not want to pay their dues, high maintenance, needy, technology experts, too technology-focused, disinterested, narcissistic, need constant praise, exaggerated self-worth, tuned out, no work ethic, have a short attention span, cannot handle criticism, are not compliant or respectful to authority, do not want to put in “the work” to learn, and are not committed or loyal (Werth & Werth, 2011; Worley, 2011; McAlister, 2009; Gibson, Greenwood, & Murphy, 2009; Ferri-Reed, 2014). How could
one group have such a negative disposition? While there may be a degree of truth to some, or all of these descriptors, these are a very broad generalization of the stereotypes that are plaguing this generation of learners. (Gibson et al., 2009)

**Understanding the Millennial Generation**

The millennial generation is the first generation in which children were desired so much that fertility treatments became commonplace. The child-to-parent ratio in this generation is the lowest in history (Sandeen, 2008). The children became the center of society, and instead of creating an environment of teaching young children by telling them what they wanted, parents asked their children what they wanted. Terms such as “helicopter parents” and “soccer moms” were coined during this time (Howe et al., 2000). Millennials are very bonded to their parents, mainly through the use of digital technology, i.e., email, text messaging, and smart phones (Tucker, 2006). This parental interaction can occur three to five times a day (Palmer, 2015).

They also share with their parents the same values and ideals. This generation is also this country’s first digital natives (Worley, 2011). They have grown up with technology, and through the ease of use of this technology, multi-tasking have become second nature (Ismail et al., 2014). This generation bears the distinction of being the most ethnically and racially diverse generation to date (McLeigh & Boberiene, 2014). Due to the financial ruin of the economy in the 1990’s, and a slow recovery even through today, the millennials are a generation that has a lower percentage of homeownership and higher level of poverty than their parents (McLeigh, et al. 2014).

Since there have been limited employment opportunities, millennials have turned to education. This generation is the most educated in history, but they are also the most indebted.
In 2014, those that graduated with a bachelor’s degree averaged $30,000 in student loan debt (McLeigh, et al. 2014).

Whereas some people may categorize this generation as being self-absorbed, or self-centered, they are actually team players. Group involvement is preferred to individual projects or accountability. They want to improve the world, and see working together as the most efficient means to making improvements a reality (Howe, et al. 2000).

The millennials are a self-confident group that has ambitious goals and want to prove themselves (Benfer et al., 2013). They want to move up the corporate ladder at a pace that earlier generations have view as not “paying their dues”. And when it comes to working for a company, not just any company will do. The company needs to reflect the millennials’ own personal values and bring meaning to their lives. The career of choice is based more on community based involvement and personal fulfillment than just higher corporate ranking (Wilton, 2008).

Millennials have been touted as being disloyal. Most grew up in a family structure in which one or both parents were extremely loyal to the company in which they worked, only to be “downsized”, showing no consideration to the needs of these families that gave so much to these companies. This generation does not want to repeat this skewed sense of loyalty. (Thompson & Gregory, 2012)

From a psychological perspective, the millennials are experiencing the negative effect of having “helicopter parents”. Armed with resources (education, finances, and placement in society), these parents have injected their influence in sheltering their children from any difficult life scenario. This sheltering has created a generation of adults that have no coping skills, and are heavily reliant on others. (Odenweller, Booth-Butterfield, & Weber, 2014). When these
adults have not had to learn how to deal with stress or disappointment due to hovering parents, it leaves them very vulnerable to the negative consequences of failure (Odenweller et al., 2014).

**Effective Teaching Methods**

For Baby Boomers and Generation X students, the lecture format of learning was very effective and considered the standard. For the millennial generation, this approach to learning is a very isolating. This type of learning is a “disconnect” from their friends and technology (Kraus and Sears, 2008). The millennial generation has a very diverse background and their learning needs change at a faster rate than the faculty that is teaching these students (Kraus et al., 2008). The expectations of this generation is to have customized learning, in which instructors are accessible 24 hours a day/ 7 days a week to cater to their individual needs (Sandeen, 2008). As cognitive psychologists have proven, in order to learn and retain information, a student must first pay attention to what is being taught. Getting the millennials to pay attention and be actively engaged is a critical component to their success (Kraus et al., 2008).

Some instructors may, in their attempt to align with the millennials, use tactics outside of their typical teaching practices to try to accommodate these learners (Roehling et al., 2010). Instructors can spend an inordinate amount of time and effort on strategies to try to engage the millennials. The reality is that former generations look at newer generations as being less dedicated or committed to their learning (Wilton, 2008).

Teaching methods that are customized and more adaptive to this generation of learners are:
**Actively Engaged**

Their world has revolved around small snippets of information, 10-15 minutes at a time, before there is some type of break. To try to lecture a millennial for longer than this time period will increase the likelihood that minds will wander. A more productive type of learning approach is engaged learning activities, where the students are working collaboratively, on something that matters to them. The students will learn through the creative process as opposed to rote teaching (Roehling et al., 2010). An important aspect of learning for this generation is that the learning must have purpose. To put in “face time” because the syllabus says it is required will not engage learning. Millennials exhibit a proficiency in their abilities to multitask, but have problems with having short attention spans and need immediate gratification (Roehling et al., 2010).

**Technology Savvy**

The millennials are digital natives, and with that comes the recognition that these students are verse in the all-encompassing digital world. If their instructor is a Baby Boomer, or even a Generation Xer, there is the potential that the student is more tech savvy than the instructor (McAlister, 2009). There are as many differences among the students of the millennial generation as there are between other generational students. (Worley, 2011) Just because someone is born into this generation, it does not mean that they are verse in technology, or can multi-task with proficiency. When the student is comfortable with the technology being used in the classroom or lab, the student is more engaged in learning. Growing up with technology, this generation has learned through trial and error, as opposed to theory and practice.
Technology should be used as an enhancement to learning, not as a distraction from learning. This generation feels the need to be entertained, and communication between the instructor and the student should be very definitive in the use of how technology will be utilized for that particular learning scheme.

**Interactive Learning**

“Gen Yers” have been asked their opinion about everything that has affected their lives since they were old enough to respond. This generation is looking to have a say in what they are learning and how they will learn it (Black, 2010). This becomes an issue of negotiation within each learning activity. Clear outcomes must be expressed for each of the learning activities, but providing mentoring and feedback throughout the process is key to successful student-instructor interaction (White et. al., 2011). Teacher engagement within the interactive learning process is greatly affected by the personality of the instructor. When an instructor can seem more relatable to a student by telling personal stories, this is considered “enhanced learning” (Kraus et al., 2008).

**Emotion-Based Instruction**

Inspiration to learn is a great motivator. If an instructor can pull at the heart strings of their students and make them feel the passion that led them to want to teach others, that instructor will have a transfixed class that wants to learn. This is considered emotion-based inspiration, and when people are inspired by the feelings connecting them to what is being studied, those students are compelled to want to learn more (Therrell & Dunneback, 2015).
Similar to children looking for boundaries and parameters, millennials are looking for role models in their instructors to teach them in a way that they can relate without the psychological stress of the instructors being parental (Stewart, 2009). When an instructor shows enthusiasm toward the subject matter, the students are not only more motivated to learn, but will have more respect for the instructor as a scholar (Therrell, et al. 2015).

**Gaming Strategies**

One of the characteristics of this generation is their ability to play games, whether it is video games or board games. The need to be constantly entertained can play a role in their learning. Christian Mastilak, an accounting instructor at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, developed a forward-thinking approach to the first day of Introductory Managerial Accounting that demonstrates cost concepts using Legos. He also has the students play Monopoly on the first day of Financial Accounting. He found that these games fit into the millennial generation learning style. It creates student-centered learning, it is entertaining, and there is an immediate result, or payoff. (Mastilak, 2012).

**Summary of Findings**

The millennials will have a dominant effect on the workforce within the next 10 years. It is estimated that they will make up 50% of the American workforce by 2020, and 75% of the global workforce by 2030 (Ismail et al., 2014). The charge of instructors in technical colleges is to understand this generation of adult learners and adapt tradition teaching styles to accommodate the needs of millennials. It is critical that technical college instructors can find a
balance within their teaching styles between challenging their millennial students and supporting them through the challenges of coping with failure (Stewart, 2009).
Chapter Three: Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

This seminar paper includes the history of millennials, the generalized misconceptions of this generation, the understanding of these misconceptions, and how this generation learns most effectively. There has been a considerable amount of research done on this generation, and the psychological effects that have resulted from their parent’s inability to let them make mistakes and learn how to develop effective coping skills. While it is easy to blame these young adults for not taking more interest in their education, this generation has developed this learned behavior from the actions of their parents. If the millennials were not so sheltered and learned at an earlier age how to cope with failure and criticism, there could perhaps be less negative stereotyping of this generation.

From a professional standpoint, it is imperative to convey this knowledge to those who have a direct influence on this generation. I have found several ways in which I can educate fellow instructors, employers, and other baking industry professionals on how to effectively train and work with the millennial adult learner/employee. I have prepared a presentation to be introduced at a future Convocation at Madison College. This presentation includes open dialogue as to the misconceptions of the millennial generation, a question and answer session with a panel of millennial adult learners, and recommendations on how to better relate to these students by adjusting existing teaching styles. I have also been selected to be part of an expert panel on the topic of Understanding the Millennial Employee. This panel will be presenting at the IBIE (International Baking Industry Exposition) in October, 2016. This exposition is held every 3 years, and will be attended by over 20,000 baking industry professionals from over 100 countries.
Recommendations

As a result of this research, the following recommendations can be made. Instructors in a technical college should embrace the opportunity to understand this generation of adult learners and to develop an understanding as to how they can be a success, not only in the classroom, but in their trade industry of choice, and life, in general. This is such an impactful time in these students’ lives, and they are not looking for another “hovering parent” to fix what is wrong. They are looking for someone to help them navigate through the struggles of learning and developing that skill. Instructors in a technical college play such a pivotal role in all adult learners’ lives. Hopefully, the millennial generation adult learner can be inspired by the instructors who can adapt to this constantly changing environment in which they teach. This is a time in which students are expected to work outside of their comfort zones, and the same can be said for instructors (Stewart, 2009).
References


