The Millennial Student: A New Generation of Learners

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Objective: Each generation comes to college with varying characteristics that distinguish them from their predecessors. Teaching has evolved into a learning centered classroom that focuses on student learning rather than on teacher delivery. The purpose of this article is to introduce the Millennial Student and identify various characteristics that influence teaching and learning.

Background: A new generation of learners has immersed themselves in the college classroom. They are determined, driven achievers who depend on technology and their support system. The method of teaching ten years ago is not the method to achieve learning with this generation. Their characteristics mimic the characteristics of the Silent Generation, those who were born between the years of 1925-1942, and are now grandparents to the Millennial. The Millennial are quite opposite of their predecessors, Generation X.

Description: There are key descriptors of the Millennial Generation that define their characteristics as a society. These characteristics are identified with a strategy to understand and use as teachers implement learning. A paradigm shift is occurring, and higher education cannot ignore the needs of these students. Teachers are taking on various roles in and out of the classroom to achieve student learning and successful teaching. Athletic training education serves the Millennial Generation not only in the classroom, but in the clinical setting as well. A new understanding of this student allows educators to develop learning skills didactically and clinically.

Advantages: Through the evolution of society, media, technology, and communication, teachers must understand their audience in order to develop instructional methods and delivery styles that will produce effective learning outcomes in the Millennial Student.

Keywords: Millennial generation, learning centered syllabus, collaborative learning, critical thinking, athletic training

T he Millennial students have arrived and are in your classrooms, cafeterias, hallways, and athletic training clinics. They are also referred to as Generation Y's, born after 1982, and are quite a contrast from their Baby Boomer parents and early Generation X.[1] Defining the characteristics of the Millennial student assists in revealing how they best learn in and out of a classroom. The purpose of this article is to introduce the Millennial Student and identify various characteristics that influence your teaching and their learning. Teaching strategies to successfully reach the Millennial Student will also be discussed.

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Who are the Millennials?

The Millennial Student is the largest and most diverse generation to ever attend college.[1] They are unlike their predecessors who attended college 10, 15, or 20 years ago. Their collective personality, thought processes, and educational tendencies are unique to traditional classroom practices and educational environments. Notable characteristics that define this generation are: lack of professional boundaries influenced by socialization, a need to have immediate feedback, a sense of entitlement, lack of critical thinking skills, unrealistic expectations, high level of parental involvement, and an expected "how to" guide to succeed in and out of the classroom. The Millennials want to spend less time on tasks and reach success with little effort.

Howe and Strauss[3] identified seven general characteristics of the Millennial student:

1. Millennials feel they are *special*. A key factor that contributes to this feeling of specialness is the unusually strong relationship today's students have with their parents. Parents are primary role models to the millennial student and remain a major resource for advice as they attend college. Receiving awards participation in extra-curricular activities has enhanced this feeling of being special. This generation is comprised of students who have been taught that we are "all winners" just for participating.

Millennials are more likely to be accompanied by their parents as they migrate towards higher education than previous generations. These commonly called "helicopter" parents are much more involved with today's college student and desire to be part of their child's college life. Millennial parents want to be an integral part of decisions made concerning academic scheduling and extra-curricular activities. Lowery terms this student-parent college sharing experience as a co-partnership.[2] Educators must be aware there are limitations on what information they disseminate to parents without student consent. Ironically, this parental generation that has such a high level of involvement in their child's post-secondary education is the same generation that fought vehemently for the freedom from releasing information to their parents when they were in college.[3,4]

2. Millennials are *sheltered*. Millennials are described as the "focus of the most sweeping youth safety movement in American history."[4(p43)] "Baby On Board" signs and children's safety locks exemplify this generation growing up with safety as a high priority. As a result, this generation expects rules and regulations along with their enforcement. Parent-driven scheduled lifestyles with little "free" time characterizes the childhood of Millennials. This regimented schedule of extra-curricular activities has decreased opportunities for independent creative thought and decision-making skills and provides challenges for both employers and educators.

3. Millennials are **team oriented.** They are less comfortable working independently. Independent work has a higher risk of personal failure and therefore, the Millennials are not as confident working alone.[5,6] As a result, students prefer to work cooperatively on projects and participate within collaborative group settings.

4. Millennials are **confident** and highly optimistic. They have big dreams and expectations with an unclear path on how to reach the level of success they are so confident they will attain. This confidence seems to stem from easy attainment of success in high school with very little effort. These students have a modest commitment to homework and are stunned and quickly become frustrated when they do not achieve an A or B in their college courses. Their ability to multitask with various forms of technology also enhances their confidence. Students instantly have information at their disposal through the internet, text messaging, instant messaging, PDAs, and other forms of telecommunication. They have total access to each other and information twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week (commonly referred to as 24/7).[7] This has led to wanting instant access and immediacy in responses. E-mailing is considered extremely outdated due to response lag time.[7] Instant messaging and text messaging provide the immediacy they want. They are mobile nomads, connected by cell phones, wireless PDAs, and laptops. They have been technologically stimulated throughout their childhood and demand this connectivity as they matriculate through college.

5. Millennials are **pressured.** Students today feel pressured to constantly perform for those who will be their judge. By being pressured, Millennials are a generation that yearns for feedback. They thrive on constant feedback and become paralyzed, often unable to proceed forward, without feedback and direction.

6. Millennials have a strong desire to **achieve.** This supports Howe and Strauss's first characteristic; the feeling of being special.[5] Throughout their childhood, Millennials have been told they are special and are expected to achieve great things. In fact, some writers believe that the Millennials are the next "greatest generation."[2,3]

7. Millennials are **conventional**. They respect cultural differences and are socially acceptant to a wide spectrum of cultures. This generation is comprised of peacekeepers, as opposed to their Generation X counterparts who are considered rebels.

Teaching and Connecting with the Millennial Student

As the higher education paradigm shifts from teacher-centered to learning-centered classrooms, so do the styles of communicating information to students. Educators provide the platform and mechanism for learning by effectively reaching students with content. In the past, content has been delivered with a traditional focus. The instructor was the "sage on stage" and completely controlled the learning environment by delivering content through lectures often using PowerPoint slides. Instructors using this type of delivery style will encounter more difficulty in reaching today's college students.[7] Reaching this generation requires educators who better understand their audience and work in collaboration with their audience, using a variety of instructional delivery methods to engage students within their own learning process. Knowing the type of student entering the didactic and clinical classroom is critical.

How can educators reach the Millennial student and provide a productive learning environment? Based on Howe and Strauss's seven characteristics of Millennial students we offer a few suggestions to assist with instructional delivery. Table 1 provides a quick overview of classroom applications.

The Millennial Student enters college with a different expectation than past generations. They have become accustomed to being hand held through the educational process and anticipate a similar environment in college. As a result of this nurturing environment, Millennials need assistance in developing independent thinking and decision-making skills. Teaching styles that work with Millennial students involve the instructor acting as facilitator of learning. Providing directed active engagement within the didactic and clinical environment from the first day of their experience will greatly assist the learning process of these students.

We suggest starting with a learning-centered syllabus which provides direction for course assignments, expectations of student behavior, and outlines rules and regulations with ramifications if not followed. The syllabus does not provide a step-by-step, how-to-guide for the student, rather it provides guidance allowing the student to decide for themselves how to engage for academic success.[7] References for how to write and use a learning centered syllabus are noted in Table 2.

Equally as important as providing an orientation to a didactic course through a learning centered syllabus is an orientation to athletic training clinical fieldwork. Clinical educators should begin with a quality orientation of the clinic including an introduction to its rules, regulations and policies. Learning outcomes and

Table 1. Defining the Millennial Student

Defining Characteristic	Characteristic Development	Classroom Application
Special	-Rewards for participation	• Provide rewards for individual and group work • Provide feedback • Teach to self-reward
Sheltered	-Structured -Enforcement of rules and regulations	• Learning centered syllabus • Clear instructions and expectations of assignments • Course calendar with test and assignment dates • Daily lesson learning outcomes
Team Oriented	-Works well in groups - Socially active	• Collaborative learning • Cooperative learning • Interactive learning • Opportunities for in and out of class social learning activities
Confident	-High level of optimism -Technologically savvy -Want to assist in creating own knowledge	• Provide clear definitions and paths to success in class • Include variety of technology in teaching and assignments • Provide feedback
Pressured	-Perform when being judged -Immediate and continual feedback on progress	• Link content to "real life" applications • Provide feedback in various forms including technological means • Timely feedback • Simulations and case work through technology and non-technology instructional delivery
Achieving	-Challenges grades and testing methods	• Develop well defined grade appeals policy • Integrate a variety of valid evaluation methods
Conventional	-Respect for cultural differences	• Utilize problem solving by integrating sociological situations from a variety of cultures.

Table 2. Learning Center Syllabus References

1. Pioneers Past and Present: Curriculum Insights from Stories that Link through Generations Lindsay, Gail M.; McGill Journal of Education, v40 n1 p189-199 Win 2005 (EJ719867)
2. Short-and Long-Term Differences in Instructional Effectiveness Between Intensive and Semester-Length Courses Seamon, Marc; Teachers College Record, v106 n4 p635-650 Apr 2004 (EJ687646)
3. An Examination of the Integrity of the Syllabus   Habanek, Darlene V.; College Teaching, v53 n2 p62 Spr 2005 (EJ711946)
4. Teacher's Corner: A Review of Syllabi for a Sample of Structural Equation Modeling Courses   Stapleton, Laura M.; Leite, Walter L.; Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal, v12 n4 p642-664 2005 (EJ722631)
5. Empowering Students: Class-Generated Course Rules DiClementi, Jeannie D.; Handelsman, Mitchell M.; Teaching of Psychology, v32 n1 p18-21 2005 (EJ724981)
6. Designing a great syllabus.   By: Matejka, Ken; Kurke, Lance B.. College Teaching, Summer94, Vol. 42 Issue 3, p115, 3p; (AN 9410194934)
7. Preparing an effective syllabus. By: Slattery, Jeanne M.; Carlson, Janet F.. College Teaching, Fall2005, Vol. 53 Issue 4, p159-164, 6p; (AN 18741383)

expectations of the clinical experience should be a shared discussion between the instructor and student. In addition, athletic training students should be given a tour of the facility (including where supplies and equipment are stored) and introduced to coaches, athletes, and others with whom they will associate during their clinical experience.

The learning centered syllabus can also initiate the first step in providing feedback for students. The syllabus defines assignment expectations along with descriptors of the evaluation tools which provide the regimented student with clear guidelines. When assignments or evaluation tools are returned to students, quality feedback should be provided. Feedback should include notes about what the student has done well on the assignment, such as good insights or excellent creative thoughts and applications.

Suggestions for improvements are equally important and should be written in a positive constructive voice. Suggestions for improvement can be noted in a question format; probing students to critically think. For example, when returning an assignment that had the student develop a treatment plan for a volleyball athlete with an iliac crest contusion, a suggestion for improvement in a question format may be worded similarly to the following examples: What physiological ramifications might occur if you return the athlete to activity too soon without protective padding? What other types of padding can you use to provide protection to the iliac crest? After providing feedback, have the student return the assignment with the feedback you provided integrated into the assignment. Providing feedback in a probing question type format provides additional opportunity for students to apply critical thinking and decision making skills.

It is important for feedback to be returned in a timely manner. Do not allow too much time to pass between the time the student turns in an assignment or test and the time evaluative results are returned. Also, providing students with "real time" feedback while on task needs to be intentionally developed when working with students in the classroom and clinic.[7] In the clinic, real-time feedback is appropriate after a student completes an evaluation on a patient. The feedback can be provided by the student performing reflective self assessment with additional comments regarding the success and suggestions for improvements by the clinical instructor for future reference. Didactically, students appreciate when their thoughts coincide with the assigned objective. In order to achieve their level of success, feedback assists the Millennial Student in constructing a sense of self by knowing where they are academically.

As opposed to their Generation X predecessors, the Millennial generation craves structure and are social creatures in and out of the classroom. Frequent and quality contact between students and faculty can increase the motivation and commitment of the Millennial student. Faculty need to schedule adequate time for student-faculty interaction including in class, one-on-one, electronic mail, or through extra-curricular activities. Posting office hours and other methods through which students can contact the instructor is of utmost importance to the Millennial student.

Team orientation and collaborative learning is the preferred learning environment of today's college student. The Millennials are accustomed to participating as groups in class discussion, team learning and activities outside the classroom. They like to socialize and share their thoughts and opinions within a "safe" group environment. They find success in group dynamic. Collaborative learning theorists encourage the use of group work for this generation but suggest group numbers range from two to six students, with the average being four students per group.[9] While group activities may enhance socialization, communication, and team skills, they may limit independent thinking or decision making skills. One way to keep students motivated to learn through group activities and impose an independent learning element is to integrate group projects that contain an independent evaluation for each person in the group. This allows students to define their expectations and enhance creative and critical thinking. An example of a group project with an individual evaluation would be students collecting and presenting information on environmental conditions. Prior to the presentation each member of the group anonymously completes an evaluation rubric on each member of their group. The scores of the peer-evaluation rubrics are then averaged into an individual score for each person in the group.

To help build confidence in student learning, pre-reading assignments with review questions can be used prior to discussion of the reading assignment in class. Review or focus questions assist students to focus their reading on the most significant and applicable points of each chapter. Students can use the review assignment in preparation to participate in class discussion and activities correlating with the assignment. Confidence also develops from timely and quality feedback that provides students with praise and suggestions for improvement.

It is known that Millennial Students are technologically savvy. List serves and electronic communication with the whole class provides an opportunity for students to post questions that facilitate discussion among their peers (with professor guidance) and provides immediate peer feedback. As a facilitator, you are teaching students how to learn, understand, apply, and critique the subject matter by engaging the student in the value of the content, rather than repetition. Students have immediate access to vast amounts of information, but often do not have the tools to use technology to extract the depth of information needed to develop critical thinking. You can engage their interest by using technology in the classroom and applying information learned to "real life" situations.

Students are finding academic success with little effort or time on task. High school statistics show that teachers spend most of their time teaching to the test.[10] Critical thinking skills will not develop if repetition of information without application is the standard. Arguments have been made that for active learning to occur, discussion is superior to lectures in regard to retention of content and transfer of knowledge to critical thinking.[3] In the development of critical thinking skills students must learn principles and concepts relating to organizing knowledge, enhancing retention, and retrieving information. Utilizing Bloom's taxonomy to define the expectations of hierarchical thinking

throughout the curriculum assists the student in developing complex thoughts. The levels of Bloom's Taxonomy range from lower to higher order thinking that include: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.[11] Comparing and contrasting, classification, organization and the use of analogies are useful in generating structured thinking.

The use of written, poster, and oral presentations are easily implemented into courses that allow the students to engage in critical thinking and construct their knowledge. These presentations also help students develop communication skills and acquire a deeper understanding of the material as they synthesize what information should be presented to their audience. The addition of critical thinking activities could occur by simply adding a one-minute writing exercise or a one-minute oral presentation that does not always have a grade attached to the assignment. It has also been suggested that if critical thinking is achieved, students are more self-motivated to actively seek further knowledge.[12]

Application of theory and evidence based practices to "real life" situations will engage Millennial students. Written simulations, case reports/studies, along with hands-on decision making activities will not only motivate students to participate but will also enhance the student's ability to partake in critical thinking and independent decision making.

Summary

The Millennial generation is currently enrolled in higher education with a new set of characteristics and values. These students face ambiguity and the challenges of self responsibility as they enter college. They are more likely to succeed if they have clear expectations and guidelines for success. Group dynamic learning is their preference but group activities must be carefully designed so independent and critical thinking can develop. Feedback is extremely important and must be provided in both didactic and clinical settings in a timely and orderly fashion. Today's educator must understand their Millennial generation audience. By understanding the Millennial student and how they learn, the educator will be more successful in creating a learning centered environment.

The educator's role has evolved from not only being the content expert, but also a developer of life-long learning. The ability of this generation also adds to the shift in teaching strategies. Creative content delivery must be integrated in order to keep the students engaged and challenged both in and out of the classroom. The Millennial generation is no longer the type of student our educational system was designed to teach.[9] (pg 1) The new student constructs their knowledge. The athletic training curriculum sequentially develops the didactic and clinical experiences to assist in the construction of knowledge, but the students are searching for more. It is the role of the educator to guide them with evidence based practices in how to search for more knowledge.

The student of today uses many forms of collaborative learning such as on-line discussion boards called blogs for case study discussions that incorporate not only the didactic course of study but also personal experiences from the clinical setting.[9] Other forms of collaborative learning are group discussions and presentations, wikis, an all encompassing website that allows editing and discussions, and on-line collaborative software used to design individualized websites.[14] The Millennials respond to challenging group games such as "Evaluation Jeopardy" and injury role playing. By understanding today's learners it is evident the role of the educator must change. No longer is education given to the students for recitation through a text and lecture style model. This generation is a collaborative and social generation that has a focus on understanding and building their knowledge through various forms of medium to discover the answers. It is for the educator to provide an arena for engagement and discovery as well as be a content expert and mentor.

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