

AOM Education and Millennial Learners

Guest Author

The traditional method for teaching Oriental medicine is one-way; faculty present the material through slide presentations or handouts. This method is pretty common in Asia, but do we in the U.S. really evaluate the effectiveness of this teaching method? Do we ever try to find out the characteristics of our current students and what their learning styles? In this article, I would like to discuss the "Millennial Learners" who started to enroll into our AOM programs.

The term "millennial learner" was first used by generational historians and sociologists Howe and Strauss in their essay *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* to describe what they thought to be quite a different generation from the previous one; the so-called *Generation X*. Millennials are those children born from the 1980s onwards who have been raised in an environment where digital technologies form an very important part of daily life. In short, Millennials are the first generation to grow up surrounded by digital media, and most of their activities deal with peer-to-peer communication and knowledge management. Accordingly, Millennials are thought to be proficient with computers, creative with technology and, above all, highly skilled at multi-tasking.

In the *executive summary* to their book, Howe and Strauss explain that the Millennials "are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in US History. As of 2002, non-whites and Latinos accounted for 37% of the 20-or-under population in 2002. One in five has an immigrant parent, and one in 10 has a noncitizen parent. These demographics have resulted in a truly global generation in which race issues are no longer Black and White, or even Black, White and Latino. In fact, non-White youths are often bigger contributors to this generation's emerging persona than White youths."

They go on to discuss the economics of this generation: "The economy has taken a great interest in this generation. They are a more highly targeted market segment than past generations, and carry significant purchasing power, although of a different nature than that of previous generations. The types of child income that have risen the most over the past 15 years have been those that parents most closely manage (gifts, joint-purchases and paid household work). Allowances and paid employment have risen the least. "The fastest growing source of teen cash has been the direct ad-hoc payment from parent to child for a specific purchase on which parent and child confer (the co-purchase)."

Typically, their everyday lives are characterized by immediate communication via instant message, cell phones or text messaging. The changing ways that this generation can learn, communicate and entertain themselves are the primary reasons behind the growing popularity of socially oriented technologies such as blogs, wikis, Facebook and Twitter. This popularity can help explain why today's teens are increasingly spending more time using digital media rather than watching TV. It should not be forgotten that Millennials usually take for granted that multi-tasking is the normal approach to using digital media: being online while at the same time watching TV, talking on the phone, and doing homework. Undoubtedly, their recurrent activity with these technologies can be said to have fundamentally shaped their notions of communication, knowledge management, learning, and even their personal and social values.

Characteristics Of Millennial Learners

Closer relationship with parents: They have admiration for their parents and may view one or both of their parents as a hero.

Closer sphere of influence: A more dangerous world has created an environment that is more sheltered and structured, where young people have been protected.

More polite and considerate: They are less likely to call adults by their first names, but rather use the more formal "Mr." or "Mrs."

Attentive and respectful: In a crowded world where there are larger numbers of people in classrooms and activities, civility becomes essential to getting along.

Programmed and team-oriented: They expect everything to be planned for them and do not expect to have as much freedom of pure play or responsibility for structuring their educational lives. They are accustomed to having a lot of adult supervision. Thus, they may have poor conflict-resolution skills.

Pressured to succeed: The Boomers, parents of the Millennial generation, pressured themselves to succeed and also transferred that pressure to their children. Millennials set the bar high for themselves and they expect success. They sometimes "expect" to get good grades and are upset when this does not happen. This pressure can also lead to stress.

Multi-taskers: This generation can easily manage to listen to music, work on the computer and watch television at the same time. This means they need a lot of stimulation in their learning environments and may actually be more focused than it seems to their teachers.

Socially conscious: This is a generation of activists who believes they can make a difference. There has been a renaissance of interest in politics and social issues.

Teaching Millennial Learners

Present the big picture: Many in this generation are global learners. They learn better if they have the big picture and then learn more concrete and specific information.

Be visual: This group is the most visual of all student cohorts. Visual learners generally predominate among all populations but among Millennial learners, it is even more strongly preferred than in other age groups.

Use technology: This is a generation that uses technology for everything. A classroom that does not incorporate technology will not meet students' needs for variety, stimulation and access to information.

Develop opportunities for experiential learning: Small group discussions, projects, in-class presentations and debates, peer critiques, team projects, service learning, field experiences, and case method approaches have been found to be successful for Millennials.

Be organized and provide lots of structure: Having grown up in a highly structured world, Millennials look for structure in their learning setting. They also learn best when materials are presented in a well-organized and rational way. They want to know precisely what is required of them, when homework or assignments are due, and very specific information about expectations.

Allow focus time: The Millennials' attention span declines after 15-20 minutes. You have students'

brains for only 20 minutes at a time. Break up the class time into 20-30 minute segments with some kind of activity.

Make it fun: Millennials want to enjoy their learning. If it is not fun, it will be cast into the category of "boring" and may become less effective. Millennials learn best when they are entertained.

Allow for creativity: This is a generation that thinks in many dimensions at once. Provide opportunities for them to be creative in how they approach and fulfill requirements. Music, art, and games are good teaching tools. *Offer multiple options for performance:* Try to provide a variety of acceptable, measurable outcomes so that students can optimize their performance.

Provide lots of feedback. Providing frequent feedback is essential for Millennials. This allows them to know when they are headed in the right direction and when they are getting off track. Frequent attention from teachers is welcome.

Be fair. Like their Boomer parents, fairness is important to this group.

Recognize the need for social interaction: This is a key for Millennial learners, so learning strategies that incorporate social interaction work well.

Tie learning to actions: For some key information, students can increase their recall if there is a specific action linked to their learning of a fact.

Make it relevant: Tie learning tasks to real-world problems. If it is not seen as relevant, there will be resistance to learning.

Summary

As you can tell, there are some significant shifts from the academic environment and culture with which we have been working (and, in some cases, battling) for the last two decades. The strategies that we have brought into the classrooms and campus life to engage students will need to be reevaluated in light of the new Millennial personality that has moved on campus. The point is that our students are not entirely like us. Whether we are faculty, staff or administration, it is critical that we remember that what is generally true for others our own age, is not necessarily true of the Millennial generation of students that now make up our undergraduate population. We must be prepared to adjust. We must use modern technology and other teaching methods to provide the best learning environment for the Millennial learners.

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