

RUNNING HEAD: Educating the Millennial Generation

Research Project

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## Introduction

Today's new learners include Baby Boomers, Generation Xers and Millennials (Oblinger, 2003). Millennials, also known as the Generation Y (Small, 2008, p. 181), were born between 1981-2000. The Millennials comprise a large population base and "may ultimately exceed 100 million members" (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 74). This generation was born during a time in history when "people again committed themselves to having, caring for, and celebrating children...Millennial kids (have) become the largest, healthiest, and most care-for child generation in American history" (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 74). "Millennials are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in the whole world. One in four grew up in a single parent household. They saw new examples of family—many grew up with working mothers, blended families and homes impacted by a divorce" (Sairany, 2009).

As I began reviewing the literature surrounding this generation, the questions I formulated were what, if anything, makes these 21st Century learners different? Can the differences be explained by the presence of technology? How are the learning processes impacted? Have recognized established learning processes been replaced by a whole new set of learning processes due to the presence of technology?

## Characteristics of Millennials

There have been multiple studies completed and books written about the Millennials. The

Millennial learners have also been deemed the Net Generation. Dede and his fellow researchers at Harvard refer to them as NeoMillennials (Dede, 2005). The characteristics that set this generation apart are varied based on the source reviewed. Characteristics of Millennials include “a gravitation toward group activity, identification with their parent’s values, spending more time doing homework and less time watching TV, fascination with new technologies...(they are) racially and ethnically diverse and often (one in five) have at least one immigrant parent” (Oblinger, 2003, p. 38).

Millennials “have received rapid exposure to a wide variety and ever-increasing level of informational activity, making them the most informed generation in history...(they) can absorb information quicker, and they reach boredom sooner when subjected to traditional teaching methods...They can process large amounts of visual information...possess advanced motor, spatial, and strategy skills because of game technology” (Junginger, 2008). According to Small (p. 181, 2008), Millennials “appear to be the most technologically sophisticated” generation. Sairany (2009) writes “for this group, cutting edge technology includes iPods/MP3s, camera phones, PDAs, digital cameras, and DVD players. The need of the millennial generation is far different and it is very important parents or teachers know what it means to be from this generation to bridge the gap.”

Tapscot (2009, p. 34) lists eight norms of the Net Generation, characterizing them as leveragers of technology, customizers, scrutinizers, entertainment seekers, collaborators and innovators. Oblinger (2003) provides examples of how the profiles of these students not only differ but that “the life experiences that shaped today’s students are quite different than those of previous eras” (p. 38).

Millennials have been called remote control kids due to the changes they constantly face (Sairany, 2009). “They seek challenge, but yearn for relief from pressure. They are the young navigators ”that must chart their own course...valuing personal experience and critical thinking (Sairany, 2009).

#### Learning style differences and approach technology

Technology...the knack of so arranging the world that we don't have to experience it.  
Max Frisch, architect and author (Small, 2008, p. 115)

The literature recognizes standard learning styles as “sensory-based (e.g., visual, auditory, kinesthetic); personality-based, and aptitude-based” (Dede, 2006, p. 9). Due to the exposure of technology into their daily lives, there appears to be an “emergence of an information-age mindset” (Oblinger, 2003, p. 40) within the Net Generation. The attributes that define this mindset reflect an extension of learning styles within this generation.

Firstly, because computers are an “assumed part of life” they are not “technology.” Connecting through a personal computer has become almost a clique with these learners, as “the whole purpose of computing is not personal...it is about connecting and collaborating and engaging with the world” (Tapscott, 2009, p. 50).

Another attribute of the information-age mindset is that “staying connected is essential...via multiple devices including cell phones, pdas, computers” (Oblinger, 2003, p. 40). As cell phone technology becomes more sophisticated, the devices are more like “small, powerful computers that are part voice communication, part Blackberry, part iPod, part Web browser, part texting device, part digital camera, part voice recorder, and part GPS compass...providing a persistent connection to the Internet” (Tapscott, 2009, p 48).

One final attribute of the information-age mindset is that “multitasking is a way of life” (Oblinger, 2003, p. 40). In a 2009 interview, Tapscott defines multitasking as “information handling and communicating.” The example provided explains how previous generations would come home, and watch TV. This generation comes home, listens to their iPod while doing homework, while texting their friends on the cellphone, while using the Internet to research, with the TV on in the background. Because of this multitasking, this generation is growing up with a better ability to process multiple streams of information at the same time.

Millennials exhibit distinct learning styles. Their learning preferences are reflected through interactive teamwork, experiential activities, and in the structure and use of technology. “Their strengths include multitasking, goal orientation, positive attitudes and a collaborative style” (Raines as quoted by Oblinger, 2003, p. 38).

### Learning Processes for Millennials

“Exciting possibilities are on the horizon for education. Employing a disruptive approach that is mindful of children’s differences presents a promising path toward motivating students to maximize their human potential and realize their most daring dreams” (Christensen, C., Horn, M., & Johnson, W., 2008).

If the information-mindset has created an additional learning style, have the learning processes also evolved within the Net Generation? Learning processes are defined in this writing as the internal processes the student uses or external exercises he engages in to create new information. Smith indicates “collaboration, reflective thinking, individual initiative, wide experience and personal interaction act as doorways for learning” (p. 91). Learning processes also include engagement and interaction, critical thinking and analysis, collaboration and group-think, development of community and social learning, independent thinking and reflection.

The Net Generation seeks their learning experience in different ways—they actually demand it. Due to their distinctive characteristics, there appears to be a greater need for social interaction, group learning and collaboration opportunities along with experiential activities that have direct relevance and applicability to their lives. Avenues for these learning activities may help to meet the expectations of the Net Generation and are discussed in the literature (Oblinger, 2003). Online laboratories are being created at many universities to provide experiences without limitations of traditional labs (p. 44). Engaging students in a historical exploration of the Civil War at the University of Virginia allows for “more effective learning than being told about history” (p. 44). Simulations and game systems are additional examples that reflect this interactive approach to learning (p. 44). Due to technology exposure and “because they have been wired since grade school, Net Geners are likely to grasp technological concepts faster.” (Oblinger, 2005, p. 4.4). These learners want “interactivity from learning technology...interaction that is relevant to the coursework” (Oblinger, 2005, p. 4.5).

The key to instruction is to offer meaningful learning experiences that are relevant to this generation. In order to do this, Robert (2005) indicates that educators must “provide multiple channels to allow these learners to seek out more information” (Robert, 2005). “Engaging learners in experiences they can relate to including activities, scenarios, feedback, storytelling, simulations and interaction...(which allow them to) see for themselves the value of the training.” These will be critical challenges for educators at all levels.

There seems to be a notion in some circles that millennial learners need to be entertained in order to learn. “To effectively train and teach the new generation, they must be entertained while educated” (Junginger, 2008). In the words of one millennial, “Entertain me. It's all about

me -and my friends -give us a laugh! We'll stop what we're doing if you're funny -or just fun.

And then we'll talk about you to practically everyone we know -and that's a lot of people!

(Decoding the Digital Millennials, 2009). However, engagement is not entertainment. Part of this notion derives from the idea that because technology surrounds these new generations of learners in the form of cellphones, instant messaging, internet, ipods, gaming (and the list goes on) that somehow our learners will be bored if we do not entertain them. Oblinger (2003) states “faculty must toss aside the dying notion that a lecture and subsequent reading assignment are enough to teach the lesson...because this generation responds to a variety of media, such as television, audio, animation, and text. The use of a singular unit should be kept short and alternating, producing a class period as diverse in structure as it is in content” (Oblinger, 2003, p. 5.9). In addition, Oblinger (2005) indicates that “before curricula can be created to challenge the Net Generation...faculty must know how (they) learn and interact with each other, with technology, and with life in general. Remember that word—interact” (Oblinger, 2005). Educators must build components into their lesson plans that provide the opportunity for students to interact and engage with one another as well as with the curriculum content.

According to much of the research, (Windham, 2005, Tapscott, 2009) engagement takes on an entirely new dimension. Millennials are “explorers, with a need to explore that is implicit in their desire to learn” (Windham, 2005. p. 5.6). They seek relevancy in what they are learning and how it relates to their lives and are seeking curriculum that focuses on “the notion of extension, or applying the lessons learned in the classroom to real-life problems, institutions, or organizations in the community...while learning the real-world application of taught material and acquiring relevant skills and experience” (Windham, p. 5.8). However, even in this age of the Internet, students still have the need for “traditional educational principles like discipline,

engagement, and interaction...they still want to be challenged. They still want exploration. And they still want creativity” (Windham, p 5.10). The challenge for educators will be great— “moving students beyond being mere participants in the class to become active learners and discoverers” (Windham, p 5.9).

Lastly, collaboration and social interaction are important avenues to engage students within this generation. “Relationships are a driving force in the learning process...learning through social interaction is important” (Oblinger, 2005, p. 4.5). According to Junginger (2008) “these learners are team oriented, and prefer a classroom setting that emphasizes group learning and problem solving, rather than one focused on lecture.” Building classrooms that provide opportunities for this collaboration will challenge educators at every level. No longer will the teacher be ‘the sage on the stage’, but will take on a role of ‘scribe on the side’ as students work in collaborative groups, utilizing techniques such as problem-based learning to further the learning experience and engagement of all students.

Implications for Educators—the current approach for the nation

The coin of the realm will be do you know how to find information, do you know how to validate it...synthesize it...leverage it...communicate it...how to collaborate with it...problem solve with it. That’s the new 21<sup>st</sup> century set of literacies and it looks a lot different than the model that most of us were raised under” (Ken Kay. From Learning to change, changing to learn, YouTube.com.)

In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education, along with major corporate players across the United States, collaborated to formulate the 21st Century Skills. These skills were defined as those essential for the learners of today, which will promote future success in work and life as adults. These skills include those grouped into learning and innovation: creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration. They also include a set of

information, media and technology skills including information and media literacy. Currently ten states have agreed to incorporate this new focus into their content standards, teacher training, and assessments (Sawchuk, 2009). The challenges will continue as educators seek the best ways to engage, interact and to teach the Millennials while incorporating this new set of defined 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills. Understanding the characteristics, attitudes and information mind-set of the Net Generation is the first step in the process. I find inspiration for forging ahead in the words of Stephen Heppel, from Learning to Change.

Those ingredients are being assembled into some stunning recipes in different places. It is a very exciting time for learning. It is the death of education but it's the dawn of learning, and that makes me very happy (Heppel, YouTube.com).

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Additional resources:

Decoding the Digital Millennials. Accessed March 1, 2009 at <http://myspace.com/ruready4>