

Bye Bye Millennials, Hello Gen Z: Are You Prepared For The Next Generation of Students?

Abstract

Millennials have been one of the most discussed generations, affecting the way universities cater to students from recruiting to building design to pedagogy. However, 21 years into the new millennium, the majority of this generation has moved on to the workforce, ushering in a new, lesser understood, yet equally buzzed-about generation— Gen Z. Therefore, the purpose of this session is to help educators understand this new population of students and solidify a teaching plan based on the targeted student's needs. Whether you are a Millennial yourself, a Gen Z student, or an educator who, regardless of their generation, seeks to understand what generational differences look like in the classroom today, this interactive session will make you rethink your entire teaching pedagogy. Time changes, and so do people; therefore, the way we teach and learn must also change.

Keywords: Generation Z, Pedagogy, Engagement

Introduction

Millennials, Millennials, Millennials, what comes to mind when you think about this generation of students? Is it lazy, entitled, never satisfied, and sheltered, or did you think optimistic, team players, trusting, civic-minded, and confident (Howe & Strauss, 1992; Kowske et al., 2010). Although some of those characteristics may be true descriptors of Millennials, this generation of students are finally graduating and entering the workforce. Thus, Millennials should no longer be the focus of faculty, instructional design, and policy development. Universities need to prepare to usher in a new generation of students who think, learn, and experience life differently, Generation Z. Currently, Generation Z represents 27% of the U.S. population, and most members of this generation were born starting in 1996 (Business Insider, 2020). The oldest member of this generation are turning 25, making this generation of students the predominant group in undergraduate and graduate courses across the country. So, are you ready to teach a new generation?

A generational measure proposed by Howe and Strauss (1992) indicated that a phase of life is approximately 20 years or two decades. Although this proposed measure is useful, there is no agreement on the particular number of generations, their defining characteristics, or what provides a generation with its “glue” that allows them to have a centralized culture (Bliese, 1999). The lack of cohesion with defining generations leads to differences in how research classifies generational cohorts. Strauss and Howe (1991) classified Millennials as those born after 1982. Wey-Smola and Sutton (2002) stated that Millennials are born between 1979 and 1994; Wilson and Gerber (2008) stated that the Millennial cohort is born between 1982 and 2003; Schullery (2013) noted that this group is individuals born between 1982 and 1999. These

differences in the classification result in Millennials and Generation Z (younger) being mixed together, although they have distinctly different generational experiences.

Although limited light has been shed on individuals born after 1996, these individuals are known as Generation Z. Generation Z, although commonly mistaken as Millennials, make up 27% of the U.S. population and 32% of the global population, making them a larger cohort than Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials (Business Insider, 2020; Spitznagel, 2020). Older members of the Gen Z cohort are currently matriculating through college. Distinguishing between Millennials and Generation Z in the classroom will be a significant feat for Universities. Specifically, faculty will be tasked to learn and adjust to a new generation of students who have distinctly different life experiences, learning and communication styles, and academic and life goals compared to the Millennial generation.

In this proposed session, we focus on establishing the differences between Millennial and Gen Z students and how we, as faculty, can prepare ourselves for the shift in learning that will need to take place. Doing so will provide the launching pad necessary to consider changes in pedagogy that need to occur as these students enter into the domain of higher education. Through this session, we want to:

1. Demonstrate the differences between Millennial learners and Gen Z learners.
2. Discuss the advantages of learning about this new generation of students.
3. Form a community of educators who are ready to inspire a new generation of learners by sharing experiences and resources.

This proposed session is designed to inform and support faculty, staff, and administrators who interact with and support these students as they matriculate through college. We welcome all levels and backgrounds to join the conversation to engage in robust dialogue that will allow for

idea generation and action steps to prepare us for the new wave of student learners and future leaders. Through discussions with the audience, we hope that, together, we will be able to cultivate learning environments conducive to the success of our Gen Z students.

Theoretical Foundation

The modern definition of a generation according to Twenge and Campbell (2008), is the pervasive influence of forces such as parents, peers, media, and popular culture, and how these forces create common value systems among people growing up at a particular time that distinguishes them from people who grow up at different times. Generational members are classified by when they are born, start school, enter the workforce, have children, and retire, which occurs at about the same time and age (Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2010). Generation classification is also related to social trends experienced by a group of individuals (Ryder, 1985; Pilcher, 1994; Joshi et al., 2011; Lyons & Kuron, 2014). Social trends include historical and social-cultural events from which similar formative experiences and unifying commonalities developed (Karl, 1952; Pilcher, 1994; Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

Distinguishing between Millennials and Generation Z is vital because each cohort possesses specific commonalities that link members to one group versus another. Generation Z, are individuals born after 1996, and currently between the ages of 25 and 11 (Howe & Strauss, 1992; Kowske et al., 2010; Business Insider, 2020). Many of the generational cohort members are only familiar with having unprecedented access to technology and the rapid advancement of technology, which means that these individuals might be close in age but have significantly different perspectives of the world around them. Members of Gen Z have greater economic well-being, are highly educated, and are more ethnically and racially diverse than any other generation (Fry & Parker, 2018; Schroth, 2019; Bialik & Fry, 2019). However, this generation also has little

to no work experience, and is most likely to suffer from depression and anxiety (American Psychological Association, 2018; Schroth, 2019). Generation Z has also been identified as “identity nomads” as they make it a point to not define themselves through only one stereotype but rather to experiment with different ways of being themselves and to shape their individual identities over time (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Additionally, this generation has experienced global terrorism, the war on terror, the great recession, election of Barack Obama, the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, climate change, racial inequality, LGBTQ+ fight for equality, election of first female Vice President, a global health pandemic, and rapid technological developments, in which the culmination of these events link generation members together in a manner that allows them to have a centralized culture and perspective that provides their generational “glue” (Bliese, 1999).

Ultimately, Generation Z cohort members are only familiar with having unprecedented access to technology and the rapid advancement of technology, which means that these individuals might be close in age but have significantly different perspectives of the world around them even compared to Millennials (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Gen Z is also referred to as Digital Natives, or people who are used to the instantaneity of hypertext, download music, have phones in their pockets, a library on their laptops, and are familiar with beamed conversations, and instant messaging (Papp & Matulich, 2011). Prensky (2001) points to Digital Natives as those who have grown up with an assortment of digital technologies and live in a wired world. A wired world is one where 90% use email, 57% have contributed online content to the Internet, and 45% own a cell phone (Moorman & Horton, 2007; Marks, 2009). As Digital Natives, this generation can and prefers to interact virtually with colleagues, supervisors, and clients in a more streamlined manner and, in their view, more effective. They are starkly different from their older

colleagues (Millennials, or are these older Gen Z?) who are “Digital Immigrants,” those who were already socialized in pre-digital ways when digital technology arrived on the scene and often struggled with their limitations and anxieties about using new technologies (Prensky, 2001; Marks, 2009).

Within Higher Education, faculty believe that they are still teaching Millennials; however, the younger members of this group are currently in graduate school or a workforce member, with Millennials presently making up 35% of the U.S. workforce (Fry, 2018). Universities need to recognize that the need for clear distinctions is upon us, as Generation Z is the current population of students and moreover, that traditional strategies and approaches that worked for prior generations will no longer be as effective for this new generation. For instance, early indicators point to this generation benefiting from independent, problem-seeking work in advance of a discussion given that they like to "work independently yet collaboratively, but on their own terms" (Seemiller & Grace 2016, Roseberry-McKibbin, 2017). This predisposition will continue to raise the bar on active learning classrooms and pedagogy (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2017) that faculty across the country utilize to engage and communicate with Generation Z. Additionally, Gen Z may be more "pictorially inclined" in their learning preferences (Beltramini & Buckley 2014) as the brain can process images more quickly than text (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2017). Indeed, as Prensky (2001) suggests, "today's students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors," as a result of being exposed to technology from birth, which has decreased the average attention span, from twelve to just eight seconds (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2017). This poses a significant challenge for faculty as they navigate how to virtually engage students in online environments as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Understanding the scope and multifaceted behavior of this generation will open paths for faculty to develop pedagogy and techniques that are tailored to cultivating and developing future leaders, innovators, entrepreneurs, and workforce members, who have the necessary skills and competencies to be successful in any industry. Without this foundational knowledge and the realization that a new generation currently occupies our classroom seats, we will be at a disadvantage in how we engage with and teach our students.

Session Description

This session will begin with panelists introducing themselves and providing a brief overview of their experiences. To set the foundation for the session, we will use a Poll Everywhere to gauge the current perspective of our attendees as it relates to Gen Z. Doing so will allow us to further direct the conversation to understand who this generation is and how getting to know more about them is the first step to developing informed instructional techniques designed to support their learning. Following the poll, we will begin to direct the conversation by starting with questions prepared by the panelists, which will allow the audience to engage in dialogue related to Gen Z. We strongly encourage the audience to voice their concerns about understanding this new generation, what anticipated challenges they might face, experiences they might have had as older Gen Zers are college freshman, and any fears related to learning about a new generation.

During the discussion time, we encourage the audience to be open and honest about their experiences with other generations of students, such as Millennials, and how these learners impacted their teaching styles, philosophy, etc. Finally, in conjunction with the audience, the panel will develop key takeaways and best practices that educators can use to strengthen their classrooms and improve academic success for Generation Z. We will also gather everyone's

email contact information to send out the take-aways to everybody and potentially form a community of support among educators ready to transform their teaching for the next generation.

Proposed Timeline

- Introduction – 10 minutes
- Discussion – 40 minutes
- Key Takeaways – 5 minutes
- Moving Forward – 5 minutes

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