Teaching Millenials, Our Newest Cultural Cohort

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F ACILITATING learning involves understanding who our students are. Different age groups seem to learn differently. Differences in learning based on age is one of many variables, certainly along with learning styles, that teaching faculty need to understand in order for those faculty to be effective.

Although age is one of the many aspects of diversity which exists in our classrooms, particularly at the level of community colleges, we still find a great number of "traditional" college-age students. These stu-

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dents, who are known as "Millennials," "Generation M" or "Echo Boomers," were born in or after the year 1992.

This group of students actually represents 70 or 80 million people, depending on the source which one happens to use, or nearly 30% of the American population. They are also the most diverse generation to have come along in our history—34% of them are minorities.

Millennials are the children of the Baby Boomer generation, and some are the offspring of the early wave members of Generation X. Apparently, these students learn differently and interact differently than former students and than their older classmates. College libraries across the nation, including Oklahoma State University Library, are now in the process of redesigning their services and their facilities in order to best serve this new cultural cohort.

When we talk about typical college students, we run into trouble. The so-called new student may be a 17-year-old Gen M student who uses instant messaging, a 26-year-old Gen X student who has "customer service expectations" about education, or a 40-year-old mother who is juggling family, work, and coursework, whether that coursework is in-classroom work or via electronic distance learning.

"Nontraditional" Is Now the Majority

Much has been written about what the National Center for Education Statistics calls "nontraditional" students, who make up three-fourths of all undergraduates. These students are defined as having one or more of the following characteristics: delayed enrollment to college; attending college part time; working full time while attending college; being financially independent; having dependents other than a spouse; classifying as single parents; and lacking a high school diploma.

We have looked at the risks for degree completion that the nontraditional student faces. Suggestions for enhancing student persistence to a degree abound.

It may be time to look at the new group of students entering higher education, the "Millennials," in terms of their characteristics, their abilities, and their values so that we can facilitate their learning as well. What is going to be needed in our diverse classrooms is a variety of teaching methods which will enable us to meet the needs of as many students as possible.

"Millennial" students gravitate toward group activity. They identify with their parents' values and feel close to their parents. They spend more time doing homework and housework and less time watching television. They believe that it's "cool" to be smart and are fascinated by new technologies. They are both racially and ethnically diverse.

One in five of these students have at least one immigrant parent.

In looking at Millennials' distinct learning preferences, Diana Oblinger and Claire Raines, who wrote the book *Managing Millennials* in 2002, conclude that these students appreciate teamwork, experiential activities, structure, and the use of technology. Millennials' strengths include goal orientation, positive attitudes, a collaborative learning style, and multitasking. Other researchers see multitasking as being a potential liability rather than as being a strength with regard to its status as a study habit.

In making the case for faculty to get to know their students, it is important for faculty to understand their students through the lens of the culture and history in which they were actually raised. Among the areas which it is important for faculty to focus on are the psychosocial development of students, the integration of cognitive theory into teaching practice, and the impact of the political, social, and economic status of the 1980s and 1990s on current college students.

Diverse Even Within Generations

Recognizing the complexity and diversity within generations as well as between college generations is essential, lest we over-generalize. Having said that, here are some characteristics that apply to many of the Millennial cohort:

● These students grew up in a time of economic prosperity.

● They are the most protected generation in terms of government regulations on consumer safety.

● They are used to being indulged as a result of changing child-rearing practices, and they are used to being consulted in decision-making by their parents.

There are strong bonds between these students and their parents, particularly with their mothers, and they stay more connected (cell phones, e-mail) with their parents even when they live away at college. (Some psychologists and educators see this bonding as positive while others see it as counter to the development of autonomy.)

They are expected to excel. If they do not excel and their parents have the financial means, they are provided tutors and coaches. The ramification of this is that many of our college students expect individual attention, extra help, and other institutional resources to be provided in order to help them with any difficulties which they encounter. Understanding the culture of our students may help ease our frustration with what we might perceive as being their sense of entitlement.

When these students were in the process of growing up, they were

highly scheduled and sheltered. They are used to listening to what their parents say; in fact, as mentioned earlier, research shows that the great majority of them get along with their parents and that 75% of them share their parents' values.

Multitasking is a way of life for this generation. While this is seen as being a strength by some sources, the difficulty that occurs is that many of these students believe they can learn complex information while listening to music or engaging in other activities.

Assuming that the picture just presented here generally describes many of the students we are now finding in our classrooms, what is it possible for us to do with this understanding of the Generation M cultural context? Much of what we already know about learning in general applies to these students as well. For Generation M, however, we may need to invent some new teaching strategies, tweak some other learning strategies, and learn what we can about using technology effectively to enhance learning.

Let's start with what Millennials seem to prefer and then discuss what makes the most sense from a cognitive learning perspective. Millennials want to learn by working collaboratively; many of them enjoy the activity of teamwork. They have a preference to learn in their own time and on their own terms. They seem to appreciate structured activities that permit creativity. They want to be involved with "real life" issues that matter to them. Most Millennials are comfortable with and enjoy using technology.

Students Must Be Actively Engaged

Now, what makes the most sense in terms of what we know about the process of learning? Most educators have recognized for a very long time that students need to be actively engaged with the material we are trying to teach them. Research from cognitive psychology shows that active engagement promotes deeper levels of processing and learning because it creates stronger connections.

Learning and memory research points out that active learning facilitates long-term memory through the process of elaborative rehearsal (a memory process that involves the use of meaning rather than rote learning). The use of examples which students can relate to and asking students to develop their own examples are ways to create meaning between students' life experience and the material which we want them to be learning.

Creating these kinds of multiple connections with concepts also facilitates the process of retrieval. The more connections which we have to the material, the more retrieval cues we have to access it. The whole emphasis on the learning-centered or student-centered classroom at-

tests to the importance of empowering students, of helping them to build on what they already know, and of helping them to organize what they know.

Part of the process of getting students to become critical thinkers involves getting them to practice meta-cognition, that is, they must become aware of not only what they are thinking but also how they are thinking. There are numerous ways which can be used in order to get students to think about their thinking and their problem solving. More and more math teachers are asking their students to write in words the steps they took in solving problems.

In my Introduction to Psychology class, I ask students to write a list of all the presidents of the United States they can remember. After they work at this memory task for about five minutes, I then ask them to share with the class the memory strategies they used. They usually can come up with a host of devices.

The More Connections, the Better

Some say they started from the beginning with George Washington and tried to remember as many as they could that followed, and then started from the current president and worked backwards. Others said they thought of significant events, such as wars and assassinations, and came up with a few names that way. Still others say they tried to picture faces that used to line their blackboards in elementary school.

This allows me to talk about memory strategies. But even more importantly, it shows students that the more connections they have to particular material, the more easily they will be able to retrieve it.

These types of metacognition exercises get students to recognize that to become more efficient and proficient at the learning process, they need to become aware of what learning strategies they use. That is the first step—the awareness and monitoring process. Then they need to evaluate how they are learning and, if need be, adjust their learning strategies.

Our task as educators involves far more than teaching the content of our courses. We need to teach students how to become effective learners and guide them in honing their critical-thinking skills.

The goals are the same for all our students—to foster academic success. The means may vary depending on many factors. One of these factors is knowing the cultural context of our students' life experiences so we can maximize their particular strengths.

For Millennials, that very well may mean engaging them with cooperative learning exercises, empowering them to be decision makers in the course, and getting them to analyze their own learning strategies. *ed*