

Education Support Cell (ESC)/TLDE Tips & Strategies

Just who are these Millennials, and how do we teach them?

Millennials. Chances are, either you are one, you teach them, or you work with them. Try out this short quiz for further information.

1. How old are you?

- A. Between the ages of 53 and 71
- B. Between the ages of 38 and 52
- C. Between the ages of 17 and 37

2. How would you complete this sentence? Computers are

- A. a necessary evil
- B. the best way to shop
- C. my main link to the outside world

3. When I was 20, what was the quickest way to get a written message across the country?

- A. Federal Express
- B. Email
- C. Instant Messaging

If you identified mostly with “A” answers, you are a Baby Boomer. Mostly “B”; you are a Generation X. “C” and you are that Millennial (sometimes called, Generation Y). [Incidentally, the next generation has been dubbed as Gen Z—digital natives, never knowing the world without smart devices and broadband internet.]

Millennials are just another demographic of our population but are quite an area of interest in the realm of education. Often characterized by older generations as “lazy, self-absorbed, entitled, and impatient”, Millennials have grown up with access to technology at their fingertips, living under the cloud of terrorism throughout their formative years, and sheltered by their helicopter parents. So who are they, and what makes them tick?

Expectations are a Key

Initially, psychologists were the ones interested in the traits of Millennials.

Christy Price, Ed.D, a psychology professor at Dalton State College became interested in this generation when she noticed her students had high expectations of success in her courses, paired with “an astonishingly low level of effort on their part” (see inset on page 2 for link to reference).

This gap between their level of effort and their expectation of success could be the root cause of some of the failures we’ve seen in q-courses. To illustrate this point, here is a comment from an early exit survey:

Question: *In your own words, why have you been relieved or recycled from XXXXX?*

Student response (and I paraphrase), *I thought I was a stud, but I wasn’t.*

The good news here is that expectations can be managed. Students need to hear often what the expectation is and that *<insert the task or course>* isn’t supposed to be easy. Like Division I athletes, we have students who are used to being **rock stars** in their own realms (or at least in their own family circles). When they come in contact with a bunch of other rock stars---and those others are actually rockin’ more than they are---it is easy to throw in the towel or to start casting blame. Millennials may need to be mentored explicitly on what to do when the going gets tough,

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and may need assistance with coming up with a plan for self-improvement or development as this skill is not in their natural repertoire. This could relate to a psychological concept known as *Expectancy Theory*. Look it up. It's a thing.

So, aside from this expectations gap, do Millennials learn differently than Boomers or Gen X's? Do we need to rethink how we do things in our courses to better address their learning needs? First, let's look at the concept of Diversity.

Diversity

The concept of teaching to a diversity of generations in a classroom is quite akin to making accommodations for the other types of diversity we find in a student population. Learning styles? Motivations? Genders? Cultures?

Different sub-groups of people have always had, as a collective, different modes or preferences for learning and their educational environment. If you have a class that is full of students, it doesn't matter the generation, some will have a preference to visual learning aids (will need to see *it*—visual learners), some will do quite well with auditory processing (want to hear *it*—auditory learners), and some will need to manipulate *it* (kinesthetic learners).

Actually, in a setting such as the SOCoE, we'd do best with understanding means of reaching the **ADULT learner** rather than focusing too much attention on the learning preferences of one specific generational sub-group. However, since this *Tips* is on Millennials, and we do have some courses that fill their seats with this specimen [*cough, *cough....qualifications], let's dive into some of the research on the best ways to engage these learners.

*Full Reveal: Addressing Millennials boils down to using Best Practices in Education.
Read on to see how.*

The New R's for Engaging Millennial Learns

Following are the new R's developed by Dr. Price.

1. **R**esearch-based Methods: Millennials prefer a wide spectrum of learning activities in a classroom. Cater to the Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic needs of all your students. Millennials are known to have shorter attention spans. They are used to moving from one thing to the next, so **CHUNK**, your lessons to allow for students to do something with new content and skills. Even lower-leveled technological options such as video clips can assist with stimulating discussions and making a presentation more engaging. The Millennial learner also prefers a learning environment that is more collaborative or team-oriented. They desire connections---not surprising when you consider the current boon in social media usage. This first R is really just about good educational practices that are aligned with how people learn.

To read the full text of Dr. Price's research, visit
<https://dspace.sunyconnect.suny.edu/handle/1951/6260>

Education Support Cell (ESC)/TLDE Tips & Strategies

2. **Relevance:** Millennials have grown up *Googling* anything they want to know. Information for the sake of information is not of value to them, nor should it be central in today's classrooms. The context of the information.....why do we need to know this and how will we use it.....is of much more importance here. Using case-studies where students have to apply information, or scenarios where problems need to be solved are of much more relevance. Additionally, having instructors who build relevance by sharing personal stories and anecdotes related to the content is important. This second R is aligned with the principles of adult learning mentioned on page 2 (*Google* "Malcolm Knowles" or "Andragogy" for more information on this.)

3. **Rationale:** Boomers and Gen X'ers respond well to authoritarian teaching styles. Millennials grew up in environments where decisions were justified and discussed with them. Realistically, this R doesn't relate as much to a military-structured learning environment; however, it could explain the mindsets of some students who are new to the military and who withdraw from selection processes upon arrival.

4. **Relaxed:** Of all the R's, this one was the most surprising to the educator in me. Millennials prefer a relaxed learning environment. When asked to describe their ideal instructor, Dr. Price found that these terms made the top of the Millennials list:

- *approachable,*
- *flexible/not rigid,*
- *nice/caring/friendly/helpful,* and
- *alert to students' understanding*

What was inexplicitly missing? *Knowledgeable!*

It is interesting that the credibility or knowledge of the instructor was not in the top section of the list at all. Millennials prefer instructors who are more guides than pillars of information. Read on to learn about the final and related R

5. **Rapport:** Millennials thrive on personal relationships. They are used to older adults showing an interest in their accomplishments. They flourish on personal connections, which is a positive for working in teams. This final R really speaks to the importance of the cadres' *coaching mindset*. If cadre team up with students on their learning, coach and mentor and take a genuine interest in their success in training, Millennials may best respond and be more likely to ask for assistance or clarification.

Actually, these New R's are not new to education. At least 3 of these are research-proven and absolutely true in educational best practices for all generations. Using more active teaching strategies (**R1**) that are relevant to the learner (**R2**) and that are delivered by someone who can make connections to the students (**R5** with shades of **R4**), really do make a difference in student achievement.

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Maybe Millennials are just better at articulating what makes learning effective than their generational predecessors? But whatever the case, there are considerations we can make in our educational practices that have been proven to affect the learning and motivations of this generation. Now, let's start looking ahead to the Gen Z's. 😊

References & Further Readings

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