

# Why Don't My Students Think I'm Groovy?: The New "R"s for Engaging Millennial Learners

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## Introduction

Ask colleagues who have taught undergraduates for a decade or more if students have changed, and they will typically respond with a resounding, "YES!" My interest in this new breed of students was piqued when I began to notice unrealistically high expectations of success among my students combined with an astonishingly low level of effort on their part. After having read the "Bible" on assessment, Angelo and Cross's Classroom Assessment, I began to embed formative assessments in the courses I taught more regularly. One of these assessments turned out to be particularly valuable. After the first major assessment or exam, I asked students to anonymously respond to the following four questions:

1. What did you do to prepare for the exam?
2. Considering what you did to prepare for the exam, what grade did you expect to earn?
3. What will you do differently in preparing for the next exam?
4. Is there anything I can do to assist you in preparing for the next exam?

In response to the first question, students offered up surprisingly candid responses. For example, they replied, "I read parts of the chapter" and "I looked over my notes the night before and reviewed during my class that meets right before." There was the classic commuter student response: "I looked over my notes in the car before coming to class," and my personal favorite, "I'm going to do much better next time, now that I bought the book." This student sat through three weeks of class and took the first exam without purchasing the required text! The most astonishing part of all of this was when these students were asked what grade they expected to earn, they confidently listed an A or a B.

The gap that existed between students' level of effort and their expectation of success was only one of many Generation Y or Millennial issues thwarting my efforts to change the world through

molding young minds, so I did what any other self-respecting teacher of psychology would do: I expressed my negative emotions through interpretive dance and went to the literature!

In my search, I discovered a wealth of information describing the characteristics of Generation Y Millennials (born between 1981 and 1999) and their hovering parents. Howe and Strauss (2007) described Millennials as wanted children who grew up central to their parents' sense of purpose.

These helicopter parents have often sheltered them, a practice that tends to extend the students' adolescence and delay their development of independence. In her book *Generation Me* (2006), Jean Twenge described Generation Y as the first generation to be fully raised in the aftermath of the technological revolution in which information has been readily available to them with the click of a mouse. This environment has driven them to be demanding educational consumers with no tolerance for delay. In addition, Twenge found that Generation Y youth are more likely to seek wealth as opposed to meaning and purpose in life; therefore, they typically view their college education as a means to an end. For these reasons, Generation Y Millennials often fail to see the value of a liberal arts education.

Finally, this generation finds social rules less important and they have become very informal in their writing, speaking, dress, and interactions with authority figures. This generational shift has undeniably increased incivility in the classroom.

Although there is an abundance of information focused on the traits of Millennials, very little has been published regarding how these characteristics impact the teaching and learning process. One exception is Ellen Pastorino's 2006 *E-xcellence in Teaching* essay, "When Generations Collide in the Classroom," in which she makes a case for understanding generational differences and their potential impact on our teaching. In keeping with Pastorino's assertion, I conducted a qualitative analysis of narratives provided by more than a hundred Millennial learners. What I uncovered was truly enlightening, and it transformed my teaching.

Over the past year, I have maintained an almost dizzying schedule of invited addresses and faculty development workshops sharing the findings of this research on the Millennial learner. Whether we like it or not, the Millennial learner is the new generation of student that we must influence, inspire, and serve. So take heed, and be warned! There may be moments during the reading of this essay when you become irate, vehemently protest, and perhaps even secretly plot to slash the tires of my minivan! At these moments, it is important to bring yourself back to a peaceful place with a Tantric Chant or an herbal tea and remember that as the author of this article, I am simply sharing what Millennial learners have offered up and so desperately wish for us to hear.

The student narratives I collected focused on three main areas and provided Millennial student perceptions regarding: (a) professors who were familiar with Millennial student culture versus those who were not; (b) their ideal professor; and (c) their ideal learning environment.

## *Student Perceptions of Professors Who Are Familiar With Millennial Culture Versus Those Who Are Not*

In distinguishing between professors perceived as familiar with Millennial culture versus those who are not, Millennial learners noted the following differences:

1. **Techno-savvy.** Millennials view a professor's ability to effectively utilize technology as an indicator of his or her connectedness to their culture. In fact, when asked to write about professors perceived as unfamiliar with Millennial culture, one student wrote in frustration, "My professor is not up to date with technology. He is still confused about how to work the VCR!"
2. **Currently relevant.** Use of "real," "relevant," and "current" examples was one of the most obvious themes apparent among professors perceived as connected to Millennial culture. As one student commented, "Use of old shows like Taxi are not practical references that the average college student can relate to."
3. **Seriously humorous.** Surprisingly, Millennials associated our tone of voice as an indicator of our lack of connection to their culture.

Instructors perceived as "boring" or "monotone" were seen as lacking connection to Millennial culture. I realize this is disheartening news to those of us who are innately boring. To make matters worse, respondents perceived professors to be more connected to Millennial culture when they used "humor" and, dare I quote the other word they used, "fun."

4. **Relaxed and relatable.** Respondents perceived professors who "listened," "related," and "talked to students about their lives," as connected to Millennial culture and perceived those professors who were "unattached" or solely focused on course content as not connected to Millennial culture. As one respondent lamented about her biology professor, "...he doesn't really talk about anything that we are interested in... he only talks about strictly class stuff and he won't go off onto anything else... he doesn't seem like he is into anything but scientific things." Imagine that, a biology professor who wants to talk about science!

Millennials also identified professors they perceived as "down-to-earth," "informal," "relaxed," and "flexible," as connected to the Millennial culture; while those described as "uptight," "strict," "intimidating," or "condescending" were perceived as not connected to Millennial culture. In general, Millennials seem to strongly resist authoritarian power structure.

Respondents relayed numerous examples of what they viewed as rigid course policies and harsh reactions on the part of the professors perceived as not connected with their culture. Student responses such as "if you forget to turn off your cell phone and it rings, it's like you're the devil" and "my professor locks us out if we are late and does not allow us to wear hats" perfectly

illustrate key generational differences between a mainly Baby Boomer professoriate and a new Millennial generation of learners.

### ***The Millennials' Ideal Professor***

Most astonishing of all the findings of my study on Millennial learners were their perceptions regarding the ideal professor. The Top Five List below summarizes respondents' views.

Millennials feel that the ideal professor should be:

1. "Energetic," "enthusiastic," and "upbeat" with a "positive attitude." I know upon reading the student quotes above, some of you may suddenly feel nauseous. Or perhaps, like me, the very thought of students desiring me to be "upbeat" drains my energy. The audacity of it all!!!
2. "Open-minded" and "flexible." Unfortunately, students are not using the term "flexible" in the physical "Pilates" sense, as they desire flexibility in assignments, course policy, and our interactions with them.
3. Alert as to whether students understand.
4. "Nice," "friendly," "caring," and "helpful."

If all this is not disturbing enough, the number one characteristic of the Millennials' ideal professor is:

5. "Approachable" and "easy to talk to."

It is hard to believe that what these students basically want is for us to be decent individuals who are responsive to them! As the sarcasm begins to drip from the page, it is important to note that I did ask for Millennials' views of the ideal professor. We should at least give them credit for not expecting us all to have chili peppers at [ratemyprofessor.com](http://ratemyprofessor.com). Upon further analysis of their responses, what is most intriguing is not what is on their list, but perhaps what is missing. In other words, they seem to care more about who we are and how we interact with them, than they care about what we know. What is painfully obvious is Millennial learners' responses suggest they highly value positive interactions with their professors.

### **The Millennials' Ideal Learning Environment**

The next Top Five List below summarizes Millennials' perceptions regarding their ideal learning environment. Millennials felt the ideal learning environment was one in which:

1. "Students know one another" and "work together in groups." This is consistent with Millennials' team orientation, interdependence, and desire for connection.
2. Learning is "relaxed," "enjoyable," and that awful "F" word we dread hearing... "fun"

3. A multimedia format is utilized, including podcasts, on-line activities, video, PowerPoint, etc.
4. "Real examples" that are "relevant" to their culture are used.

The number one characteristic Millennial respondents desired in an ideal learning environment was that it be:

5. "Interactive" and "participatory."

Interestingly, the most consistent theme present in the analysis of the Millennial responses was they preferred a variety of teaching methods as opposed to a "lecture only" format. It is important to note that these Millennial students did not attack the lecture method altogether, but they had strongly negative perceptions of learning environments in which lecture was the only method used. According to one Millennial respondent, "If you lecture all throughout the time then we get bored. If you are constantly changing from lecture, to discussion, to group work, that helps a lot. It helps keep us awake and we learn more. Stuff gets into our head better."

## Summary

In presenting on this topic, I often summarize the main themes of this research with the following five new "R"s for engaging the Millennial:

**Relevance.** Millennials do not typically value information for information's sake. One of the greatest challenges of the professoriate will be to connect course content to the current culture, and make learning outcomes and activities relevant to Millennial learners and their future.

**Rationale.** Unlike Boomers who were raised in a more authoritarian manner in which they more readily accept the chain of command, Millennials were raised in a non-authoritarian manner and are more likely to conform, comply, and adhere to course policies when they are provided with a rationale.

**Relaxed.** Millennials thrive in a less formal, more comfortable learning environment in which they can informally interact with the professor and one another.

**Rapport.** Millennials are extremely relational. They are more central to their parents' lives than previous generations and are used to having the adults in their lives show great interest in them. They appreciate it when professors show that same interest, and they seem to be more willing to pursue learning outcomes when we connect with them on a personal level.

**Research-based methods.** Millennials have grown up in an era in which they were constantly engaged. When they are not interested, their attention quickly shifts elsewhere. This research suggests Millennials prefer a variety of active learning methods, as opposed to a more traditional lecture-only format.

## Conclusion

Clearly, meeting the needs of Millennial learners is a topic still under study, yet I highly encourage you to apply these initial findings to your practice in the classroom. I regularly receive enthusiastic e-mails from professors who have participated in my workshops and subsequently altered their methods. It is my hope that this essay will inspire you to do the same.

## References

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## About the Author

A Professor of Psychology at Dalton State College, Christy Price has been teaching at the collegiate level for seventeen years. Christy won the Excellence in Teaching Award at Dalton State in 2007, the University System of Georgia Teaching Excellence Award in the Two and Four-Year College sector for 2008/2009, and she was honored by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition as one of ten Outstanding First-Year Student Advocates for 2009. Christy's awards are, in part, a result of her use of innovative strategies in assisting students to achieve learning outcomes. Her dynamic and interactive style make Christy a favorite as a professor and presenter. As a recipient of an institutional foundation grant award, Christy has studied teaching techniques that influence student motivation. Her most recent research focuses on engaging Millennial learners and preventing incivility in the classroom.