

## Comparing current students to a pre-Millennial generation: Are they really different?

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### ABSTRACT

The Millennial generation, also known as Generation Y, has garnered much attention in the print and broadcast media and at academic conferences because of the challenges that they pose to universities and corporations. Aggregate characteristics and preferences of the Millennial generation and of Generation X, their immediate predecessors, have been frequently described in the business literature and press. This article identifies the dynamics of the Millennial generation, briefly compares them to Generation Y, and explores the perceptions of the Millennial generation and Gen Xers in an experiential learning environment, a senior-level management simulation class. It is hypothesized that these cohorts, with different generational values and traits, will perceive some aspects of the simulation experience differently. Using a time-lag approach, the results of a survey given to each generation are presented and discussed.

Keywords: Millennials, Generation Y, experiential learning, generational differences

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## INTRODUCTION

Generations, groups of people living in a particular range of years, share unique experiences and are therefore thought to exhibit similar behaviors and traits. The Millennials, also known as Generation Y, have garnered much attention in the print and broadcast media and at academic conferences because of the challenges that they pose to universities and corporations. While slightly different birth years are attributed to this generation, this discussion employs the timeline of the Pew Internet and American Life Project which dates their births between 1977 and 1992. Most of our recent students belong to this generation while those in our comparison group are mostly from Generation X and were born between 1965 and 1976 (Jones and Fox, 2009). The term generation is defined in this context from a non-biological perspective.

The Millennial generation has been described in the business literature and press with a set of traits and preferences that distinguish it from previous generations. One report, citing Pew Research Center conclusions claimed that this group is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation ever in the U. S. (Targeted News Service, 2011).

Howe and Strauss identified seven core traits of Millennials germane to the delivery of higher education; they are special, sheltered, confident, team oriented, conventional, pressured and achieving (2003). As a generation that is very close to and admiring of their Baby Boomer parents, the Millennial group feels a special attention and their parents reinforce this with their involvement in the matriculation process (Howe and Strauss, 2003). As such, helicopter parenting shelters Millennials (Howe and Strauss, 2003) and leads to unrealistic expectations. Millennial students are confident about their abilities and optimistic about their futures (Howe and Strauss, 2003) (Sax, 2003). One reason for their confidence is their proficiency with technology (Newton, 2000). Millennials have predilections for working in teams and structured activities (Howe and Strauss, 2003). Howe and Strauss view this generation as perhaps the most capable one yet (2003); and Lowery points out that being special has placed high expectations on them (2004). They are traditional and follow rules.

The pressure to succeed in school and life makes for an anxious generation (Newton, 2000). Murray, cited in Wilson, suggested that Millennials might face difficulty in college as they transition from a high-structured environment to a more ambiguous one (2004). “The American Freshman” survey released in January shows that the percentage of students reporting feeling overwhelmed (29.1%) increased by two percent from the previous survey and revealed a decline in the percentage of students (51.9%) whose mental state was “above average”, the lowest ranking ever reported (On Campus, 2011). Two researchers comparing 2004-2008 undergraduates to pre-1990 undergraduates on several psychological characteristics concluded that learning was at risk due to an increased external orientation and an overemphasis on self-worth goals, among other things (Stewart and Bernhardt, 2010).

With regard to work attitudes, Twenge examined three time-lag studies on generational differences and concluded that Gen Y articulated a weaker work ethic and lower work centrality than Gen X and Baby Boomers and that leisure was valued. The Millennials appeared to be no higher in altruistic work values than Boomers and Gen Y (2010).

Not everyone accepts generational categorization. Singham posits that “...generational stereotypes are of no value for professors...but what we are observing may not be a result of new traits emerging, but rather old traits manifesting themselves in novel forms because of changes in

external conditions. Maybe parents have not become more clingy or students more psychologically dependent on them. Perhaps the truth is simply that college has become vastly more complicated and difficult to navigate...so some parents have felt obliged to step in more..." Singham asserts that some of the best teachers are accepting generational labeling when they would never allow other kinds of stereotypes (2009). It is important to note that the traits and preferences are descriptive of the aggregate and therefore obscure individual differences. Yet there appears to be a widespread perception of Millennial traits; while the traits may not be accurate for all, our colleagues continue to complain that Millennials don't read or study and have described them as grade-focused whiners when their grades do not meet with their expectations. Noting the possibility of stereotyping, Taubeneck interviewed 14 Northwestern University students across six schools and concluded that they were pressured, hardworking and technologically proficient. Her interview with the dean of student affairs supported that many parents were involved in various aspects of their children's lives (2006).

Interactive and experiential approaches have been suggested to reach this team-oriented and technology capable cohort (Anglin and Anglin, 2008) (Breunig, 2005) (Dede, 2004). Lancaster and Stillman, cited in Vito, Chhatawal, and Taneja assert that short attention spans are conducive to interactive learning and group exercise. The latter researchers examined student satisfaction in accounting classes and found support for the employment of short experiential learning tasks (Vito, Chhatawal, and Taneja, 2010). Dede noted that universities can benefit by using emerging technologies which complement "the increasingly 'neomillennial' learning styles of their students." Technological learning styles include, but are not limited to, fluency in simulation-based, virtual settings; certain communal learning experiences; and a balance of experiential learning, mentoring and reflection (2010). But Stewart reported that an experiment in a psychology class aimed at keeping the learning climate emotionally positive by providing written pre-exam reviews and permitting group, as opposed to individual, research neither served the motivated nor less motivated students (2009).

By comparison the previous generation, GenX (the thirteenth generation as described by Howe and Strauss) has been described as: practical; self-reliant; mistrustful of institutions; tolerant of diversity; computer oriented; and intolerant of rules (Thielfoldt and Scheef 2004) (Losyk 1997). Gen X was also characterized as pessimistic about the future and more individualistic like the Baby Boomer generation (Bristow 2011)(Losyk 1997). In the workplace they have been viewed as disloyal and arrogant (Sunoo 1995)(Losyk 1997). As consumers they have appeared to be savers as opposed to spenders and value conscious (Chiger 1998)(Losyk 1997).

## **BUSINESS SIMULATIONS**

The use and effectiveness of non-lecture approaches to business education has long been a topic of pedagogical discussion. One technique which dates to the late '50s is the business game (Li and Baillie, 1993). Today, dozens of business simulations, many of which employ computer algorithms, are available to educators. And a growing body of research compares experiential tools, such as business simulations, to more traditional teaching approaches (e.g., Whitely and Faria, 1989; Specht and Sandlin, 1991) and evaluates their internal and external validity (e.g., Wolfe, 1990; Wolfe and Roberts, 1993). The business simulation purports to offer a hands-on learning technique which allows students to practice and apply what they have learned. Team

business simulations potentially allow for collaborative learning and development of interpersonal skills, as well.

A Management Simulation course taught at one university was a senior-level requirement for management majors that employed a true team-based approach to learning. The Management Simulation course required students:

1. To consider the multidimensional aspects of decision-making;
2. To coordinate the functional areas of business in the decision-making process;
3. To use the quantitative and qualitative tools and methodologies of the discipline of management to gain hands-on experience using computers;
4. To apply tools/knowledge in a group setting;
5. To develop rational decision-making skills
6. To consider ethical and social problems;
7. To understand and appreciate the consequences of domestic and global decisions on profitability and community standing.

These objectives reflect both the artistic and scientific nature of management. In this course students made high-level decisions for an information systems firm and were expected to manage and structure necessary activities with only occasional guidance from the instructor. A survey (see Appendix) was created to assess several of the course objectives above.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A time-lag approach using the same questions given to students of similar ages minimizes age as a factor in explaining differences. The survey appears in the appendix. Twenge asserts that in such an approach differences are more likely explained by generation or time period (2010). An identical survey, using a Likert-style scale, was administered to all Simulation classes in both the Fall of 1995 and the Spring of 2011. Sample sizes were 48 and 44 respectively and a test was conducted for statistical significance at the .01 level. Given the generational dynamics and preferences described above, we hypothesize that, in general, generational differences will appear in the results. Specifically:

Expectation 1: Millennials should find the experiential, simulation approach at least as appealing as Generation X;

Expectation 2: Millennials should appreciate working in teams at least as much as their predecessor generation;

Expectation 3: Millennials should want more teacher interaction than their predecessor generation;

Expectation 4: Millennials should appreciate ethical and social issues at least as much as their predecessor generation;

Expectation 5: Millennials would have less of an appreciation for theoretical concepts.

As reflected in the statistically significant results of Table 1, in relation to expectation 1 above, Generation Y actually enjoyed the experiential approach less, and perceived the experiential approach as being more complex than did Generation X. There was no statistical difference in the generations' preferences for a simulation format over a lecture format or case study approach (slightly preferred) or in their degree of interest in the course (interested). Perhaps as an effect of enjoying the course less, Millennials perceived that they learned less, relative to Gen X, than in other courses. They also clearly disagreed less with the statement "The simulation was too much of a "game" and not enough of a learning experience."

In relation to expectation 2, Generation Y had a stronger agreement on the statement "I tried to do my best for my team (4.89/5.0)" and disagreed to a greater extent that the course required too much out of class group time. Like their Gen X predecessors, they enjoyed the group format and did not prefer less group work.

In relation to expectation 3, Millennials clearly would have preferred more teacher interaction and responded more neutrally to the statement "I thought the amount of teacher interaction with the groups was just right."

In relation to expectation 4, ethical and social issues were mostly integrated in the course via the critical incidents, eleven scenarios that required students to make qualitative decisions about these issues. Yet Gen Y students found the incidents to be less interesting than their counterparts and were more neutral about having learned from them.

In relation to expectation 5, Millennials' perceptions of their understanding of the business environment, and of concerns of upper level managers, and of strategic planning were less than those their counterparts.

## CONCLUSIONS

Expectations 1 and 4 were not met. Expectations 2, 3, and 5 were met. While some experiential and interactive learning tasks have been recommended for this generational cohort, the current students did not enjoy the simulation as much as those of the previous generation. This outcome, while not predicted based on the literature, was consistent with the observations of the instructor and others' anecdotes. The fact that recent students desired more teacher interaction suggests that a more structured, guided approach may have engaged them. While Gen Y students perceived that they were doing the best for their teams, this perception above may reflect overconfidence mentioned in both the literature and teacher and employer anecdotes.

## APPENDIX

### Survey

Please answer the following questions as honestly and thoughtfully as possible. Write the appropriate response in the left hand margin.

SA = Strongly Agree = 5

A = Agree = 4

U = Uncertain = 3

D = Disagree

SD = Strongly Disagree = 1

1. I enjoyed the simulation approach to learning.
2. I thought the CORPORATION simulation was interesting.
3. I thought the CORPORATION simulation was too complex.
4. I prefer a simulation approach to learning to a lecture approach.
5. I prefer a simulation approach to a case study approach (e.g. as in Strategic Management).
6. I feel that I learned as much in this course as I typically do in other courses.
7. I enjoyed working in a group.
8. I would prefer less group work.
9. The amount of reading in the course should be increased.
10. I would have preferred more learning activities (e.g. exercises, cases, lectures) in this course.
11. The "critical incidents" made the course more interesting.
12. I learned from the "critical incidents."
13. There was too much "number crunching" in the simulation.
14. I tried to do my best for my team.
15. It was difficult to learn how to use the CORPORATION simulation.
16. I would have preferred more assignments involving the computer.
17. The course required too much out of class group time.
18. The course helped to familiarize me with the business environment.
19. The course helped me to understand the concerns of upper level managers.
20. The course required me to integrate knowledge and skills learned in other courses.
21. It was too difficult to predict the outcomes of decisions in the CORPORATION simulation.
22. I better understand strategic planning as a result of this course.
23. I better understand financial management as a result of this course.
24. I gained insight into how to function effectively within a group setting.
25. I feel more comfortable speaking to a large audience as a result of this course.
26. This "group project" was a positive learning experience.
27. I thought the amount of teacher interaction with the groups was just right.
28. I would have preferred more teacher interaction with my group.
29. I more fully understand the functions of planning and organizing as a result of this course.
30. I would like to use a simulation approach again.
31. The simulation was too much of a "game" and not enough of a learning experience.
32. The CORPORATION program is a reasonable simulation of the real world.
33. I would have liked more in-class group time.



**Table 1**

The following table summarizes results for statistically significant responses:

Question	Gen X	Gen Y	Sig. Diff.
I enjoyed the simulation approach to learning.	4.28	3.88	0.0149
I thought the CORPORATION simulation was too complex	2.02	2.95	0.0001
I feel that I learned as much in this course as I typically do in other courses.	4.08	3.57	0.0018
The “critical incidents” made the course more interesting.	4.06	3.77	0.0095
I learned from the “critical incidents.”	3.92	3.61	0.017
I tried to do my best for my team.	4.52	4.89	0.0001
It was difficult to learn how to use the CORPORATION simulation.	2.36	2.89	0.0068
The course required too much out of class group time.	3.36	2.45	0.0001
The course helped to familiarize me with the business environment.	4.14	3.36	0.0001
The course helped me to understand the concerns of upper level managers	4.08	3.7	0.0105
I better understand strategic planning as a result of this course.	3.98	3.55	0.0014
I thought the amount of teacher interaction with the groups was just right.	3.62	3.05	0.0016
I would have preferred more teacher interaction with my group	2.86	3.36	0.0046
The simulation was too much of a “game” and not enough of a learning experience.	2.08	2.64	0.0003

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