# Teaching strategies for today's college student

## Estrategias educativas para el estudiante universitario de hoy

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**Abstract**

Defining who the current college students are and identifying their generational characteristics will assist faculty in the development of successful educational strategies to ensure course outcomes are met. A closer look at this generation of college student is explored and reveals many things, including how faculty can be successful in educating them. Because students are digital natives, faculty must utilize a variety of technologies while incorporating face-to-face interaction. Rethinking modes of communication with students outside of the classroom and understanding the need for support services is a must. Classroom rules and expectations should be clearly communicated and an awareness of the necessity of mentoring relationships by this generation of students is needed. By understanding this current student generation and what motivates them, as educators, we can better serve them, and positively impact the future. The authors have identified successful use of strategies utilized in their classrooms to engage students.

Keywords:   Generation, Students, Methodology, Communication, Technology

**Resumen**

Para los que han sido profesores universitarios por varios años, la educación universitaria actual presenta un reto. Esta juventud ha crecido en un mundo cibernético, y por tanto, los profesores deben desarrollar estrategias educacionales que aseguren que el material  presentado por el instructor ha sido asimilado por el estudiante.  Lo primero que el profesor debe hacer es explorar de una manera bastante profunda las características más importantes de esta nueva generación.  Basado con este conocimiento, el educador necesita ponerse al día con los avances tecnológicos. Las expectativas y objetivos del curso deben ser explicados claramante con el fin de evitar controversia, sin olvidar que la misión del profesor es ayudar al estudiante cuando él lo necesite. Empleando estos métodos de entendimiento de esta nueva generación, los educadores pueden estar seguros que están impactando de una manera positiva el futuro de esta juventud que hoy tienen en sus manos.

Palabras clave: Generación, Estudiantes, Metodología, Comunicación, Tecnología

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## 1. Introduction

Named in 2009 as the eleventh greatest song by Rolling Stone Magazine, Pete Townshend authored "My Generation", a youth anthem that is as valid today as it was in 1965 when it was penned. The point of *The Who* recording was that the older generation "just does not get it". The rapid advance of technology and the prevalence of a global economy highlight differences between the previous generations and students of today. Today, as in the past, the consequences of these differences are particularly evident in higher education with an aging faculty and the current generation of college students.

Who are the current college students and what are the differences between them and today's university professor? There are numerous publications that describe the current college student; however there is a discrepancy among those publications concerning the *profile* as well as the *name* of the current generation. Defining who the current college students are and their generational characteristics will assist faculty in the development of successful educational strategies to ensure course outcomes are met. Providing clarity of where we are now in higher education and how higher education should react to these differences is essential to the future success of academic programs and our graduates.

Prensky describes a radically changing college student and an educational system that is no longer the system designed to teach the student of today (Prensky, 2006). Generational theory is an ever-changing body of knowledge that should affect how faculty create and implement teaching methodologies, but many times, this is not the case. How we react to the world around us is based on past experience and the age at which we have those experiences. Being a part of a generation is not something you get to choose: it is solely based on when you were born. A generation is most often defined as a group of individuals born at about the same time[1]. Faculty and students often experience generational differences in language, behaviors, knowledge, morals and reactions. Finding common ground and embracing the positives of this generation of students can serve to create a bridge between faculty and student.

Generational differences can be perplexing to the aging professoriate in higher education. It is not unusual for even the veteran professor to express some confusion about what works best when educating today's college student (Eisner, 2011). These differences are commonly referred

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[1] Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia, 2014, s.v., "Generation."

to as the generation gap. A generation gap is defined as the set of differences in ideals, attitudes, experiences, etc. that exist between an older and a younger generation of people living at the same time[2]. Understanding that the perspectives of today's students are a reflection of the contemporary culture is the first step in determining how best to teach the current generation (Twenge, 2009). How a person views the world creates differences in how each reacts to the world. In education we continue to do things because "that is the way we have always done it" without regard for need or outcomes. The differences in generations can affect faculty's ability to connect with today's student, and as faculty we should remember that "the ability to relate to students is a critical aspect of teaching and will only continue to grow in importance" (Espinoza, Ukleja & Rusch, 2010, p. 30).

It is important to identify what makes the current generation tick in order to effectively educate them. After defining who the current generation of students is, faculty can make a shift from how they educated previous generations of students to how they should educate the current generation of students. Recurring themes in the literature point to a plethora of variables that must be taken into consideration when determining best practices. Rethinking how students view technology, communication, feedback, support services, mentoring and classroom rules, and how these apply to the current generation, is a must if faculty wish to successful educators.

## 2. Development

### 2.1. College Students of Today

Controversy is evident as to how to define the current college age students in terms of common characteristics, birth dates and even what we call them. The two names and descriptors that seem the simplest and clearest are Net Geners (Berk, 2009) and Generation Mers (Twenge, 2006). Other terms commonly used to identify the current generation of students are Millennials (Atkinson, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000), Generation Y (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008), and more recently, Generation iY (Elmore, 2010).

Twenge describes Generation Me as those individuals who were born from the 1970s through the 1990s. Twenge describes her own research as well as others' related to generational differences, and describes Generation Me as people who grew up in an era when focusing on one's self was not just tolerated but also actively encouraged (Twenge, 2006). This generation of

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[2] Webster's New World College Dictionary, 4th ed., s.v., "Generation Gap."

the self-absorbed, me-first thinkers appears to be positive and cheerful but these characteristics often fade as they reach the reality of adulthood. Twenge describes young people of this generation as needing approval, having high self-esteem and believing they can have it all. This often leads to high achieving individuals who do not know how to deal with any type of adversity in the classroom.

Berk describes the 18-year-old to 20-something group of college students as Net Geners (Berk, 2009). Berk uses a variety of sources to describe a common persona of the current college student to be a team orientated, highly pressured, over achieving and a confident individual.

While many of today's students fall within the descriptors of the Net Geners, others describe today's college students as entitled, rude, disrespectful, confrontational, and lacking social boundaries.

As college faculty, we need to take a step back and look at the positive side of this generation. Generation Me believes diversity is the norm; they are technologically advanced; they are not afraid to try new things, and are skilled at data retrieval. Because of technological developments, they have a great deal of knowledge related to a large variety of topics not easily available to past generations. An often held belief is that Generation Me is lazy. This is not true; they choose to work differently than past generations. Professors need to find ways to optimize those who choose to work differently. Like professors in the past, today's professors are also facing a generational language barrier. Faculty must continually be aware of communication needs and barriers of each generation as they pass through the education system.

The current generation of college student is focused on a ensuring school/ life balance, which gives way to a work/ life balance upon graduation (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). An aging faculty does not understand this, as previous generations saw work as the driving force in their lives (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). This generation is more connected to the work smart and play hard philosophy. This is not to say that the current generation should not be held to high standards, just that it is important for faculty to be flexible.

## 2.2. Technology

The sonic speed of the changes in technology alone makes this generation of college students profoundly different than those before them. It is difficult for the college professor to compete with the high tech media driven world of the Net Gener. Many college professors have noted the difficulty of keeping up with technology and have decided not to even try. They often overuse PowerPoint, which many students find boring (Young, 2009). Net Geners are often described as numbed from under stimulation in the classroom (Berk, 2009; Prensky, 2001).

This generation trusts the digital world and sees it as the fastest and the best source for all information (Prensky, 2001; Espinoza et al., 2010). This generation feels that they are technology savvy[3], but Elmore warns that because of this, they expect easy and instant results (Elmore, 2010). Prensky (2001) describes Generation Me as digital natives and faculty as digital immigrants. Digital immigrants are individuals who remember when the world was not a digital world, but have at some point adopted many or most aspects of the technology age. Because this generation of students has always been digitally connected, they see computers as tools that are necessary for everyday life, and prefer digital media because it is interactive (Mangold, 2007).

Having grown up with the technology, the Net Geners' familiarity with most forms of gadgetry is second nature (Berk, 2009). They prefer typing to handwriting, want a quick response, need constant feedback, require no paper, and rely almost entirely on search engines for information. They are also avid media creators and move seamlessly between real and virtual worlds (Berk, 2009). Faculty must consider that although students are digital experts, instruction and strategies for learning new material remain important to them.

Knowledge of technology and the technical skills are the basis for several of the characteristics of this generation and this knowledge must be incorporated into teaching strategies. Interactive teaching with technology is a must when creating teaching methodologies, and faculty must stay current with these technologies as they evolve (Eckleberry & Tucciarone, 2011). Hands-on activities that include simulations, multimedia usage and even incorporating cell phone usage, as a way to poll students during class are options that should be explored and incorporated.

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[3]"Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next," Pew Research Center, last modified January 9, 2007, http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2007/01/09/a-portrait-of-generation-next/

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## 2.3. Communication and Feedback

College students crave more social face-to-face interaction so they attend class seeking this opportunity. Easy access to mobile devices allows students to "sidebar" with a neighbor or online, which is often perceived as rude and annoying to the professor (Berk, 2009). Professors must compete with the devices and play to the audience. What motivates this group of learners to engage during class? How do today's students communicate?

These are key questions that must be answered in order to support success for faculty and students. Students must be motivated not only to attend class but also to engage in the learning. A good strategy is to include activities that allow students to work in groups. When lectures are used as the teaching format, audience participation should be encourage (Eckleberry & Tucciarone, 2011).

Because today's students desire instant feedback, faculty must rethink how they communicate with them outside of class (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). Instead of setting up appointments to visit with faculty, students are more inclined to text or e-mail when seeking answers. It is important to understand this generational difference, and perhaps limit the number of traditional office hours professors are required to keep in lieu of the fact that they are answering student questions and concerns using other approaches.

## 2.4. Classroom Rules

The new age of sexual freedom and lack of cultural rules are strongly affecting today's students. They are less likely to follow social rules and have less experience with group norms due to their technology driven social life. One of the largest generational changes that can be seen in today's student is the focus on the individual (Fukuyama, 1999). Being an individual comes first; this focus can lead to competition that can create positive and negative behaviors in the classroom. The advantage of this can be directly linked to the fact that differences between individuals are now more widely accepted (Twenge, 2009). Creating classroom strategies that allow for individual success and recognition while balancing this with group interaction will support today's student success.

There are few if any boundaries related to personal information for Generation Me. This openness extends to communications at work and home with managers describing young employees as too open. Profanity is common and not seen as offensive, in everyday life and in the media. This generation does not care what others think, and centers on individualism. This focus has produced a generation who thinks very highly of themselves, expects success and does not take failure or criticism well. Respect and accountability will need to be clearly defined and expected from this generation. Loose boundaries in classrooms may no longer work for this generation where respect and rules may not be seen as necessary or important.

If self comes first, then sleeping in instead of going to class would be the best choice if a student were tired. Rules with well-defined consequences will encourage attendance and positive behaviors. Expectations must be clearly communicated and requirements stated with no room for interpretation. These classroom norms can be communicated using a variety of mediums and should be presented prior the beginning of the course. This allows time for the student to adjust and ask questions.

## 2.5. Support Services

Over emphasis on "you can be anything you want to be" creates unrealistic expectations and disappointment in this generation. Young people expect to get to the top quickly and to be able to live the high life as the media portrays it. These expectations are beyond youthful dreams and while some dreams can be beneficial in achieving end goals, the self-centered individual does not make a good team player. This generation needs realistic advising at the high school and college level.

Trends show that depression and loneliness are growing in large numbers for the Me Generation (Twenge, 2009). With all of the advantages this generation has, one might think they would be happier. This generation of college students openly extends the concept of "I" come first, which leads to great freedom but also creates enormous pressure to succeed. They expect more, at a time when more may not be possible. Competition is intense for school admissions, jobs, and even relationships. Relocating is common to gain opportunities, which often lead to isolation from family and friends. Even if they get into the school or snag the perfect job they are more likely to be unsatisfied unless it means more money and more things. Perhaps it should be the "more" generation.

Faculty and staff must have a better understanding of the differences between college students and faculty to provide support and services that meet the needs of Generation Me. Accepting these differences and embracing student needs is important in higher education and the work place. Career counseling with specific opportunities for internships and hands-on experience would benefit young people in making career choices.

Allowing failure to be an option, and following up with counseling suggesting trying again or changing direction would benefit members of Generation Me. Faculty should focus on encouraging students while steering them in a direction in which they are most likely to be successful (Twenge, 2009).

## 2.6. Mentoring

The students of today desire a close relationship with authority figures (Eckleberry & Tucciarone, 2011). Espinoza et al. (2010) determined that successful managers of Gen Y individuals are adept at forming mentoring relationships. Faculty should remember that the current generation has expert advice at their fingertips in the form of i Phones and computers. The generation of students taught today 'want a guide on the side before they want a sage on the stage' (Elmore, 2010).

## 3. Conclusion

Higher education has proven to be slow to change and is often seen as stuck in the past. The current student is profoundly different from past generations of students due to the changes in technology alone. What is known about the current generation of students should direct our efforts to provide effective instruction in higher education.

It is important to remember some of the historical events that occurred during the lives of the current generation. This socially connected generation has been exposed to world events such as the release of Nelson Mandela, Prince Dianna's death, the Chilean earthquake, and the Asian Ocean tsunami. Although they are more socially connected, computer-savvy and independent, they easily get bored, expect feedback, and desire supervision, interactive learning and mentoring.

The authors have successfully implemented many of the suggestions outlined above in university classrooms and in workshops. They worked together to implement an interactive,

technology-supported scavenger hunt for classroom purposes in order to actively engage students in the learning process. Data from surveys documented that not only were the learning objectives of this activity met, but students found the activity to be enjoyable (Jogan & Johnson, 2015).

In order to guide student learning, creation and implementation of student oriented learning outlines have been used by the authors to engage learners in workshops as well as in classrooms. A student oriented learning outline is a systematic approach to teaching that begins with unit topics, derives general learning goals from these, provides a convincing rationale for learning, and, for each learning goal, provides specific learning objectives.

The student oriented learning outline then tells students effective ways to learn each objective and furnishes them with a non-graded means of determining if they have learned – prior to being evaluated for grading purposes.  Research conducted by the authors has shown that utilizing student oriented  learning  outlines positively affects achievement of learning goals while engaging learners. Furthermore, perceptions by students of student oriented learning outlines and feedback received through non-graded assessments were overwhelmingly positive (Johnson, 2014; Jogan, 2014).

In their classes the authors have given meaningful feedback to their students in traditional ways, as well as though review games and activities (Jogan, Jack & Jogan, 2007). Data on the number and frequency of affective learning indicators associated with learning modules and workshops was collected by the authors (Jogan and Johnson, 2015). This information has been utilized to hone teaching modules and workshops into ones that students find valuable. Additionally, data collected from surveys completed by recent graduates document the importance of mentoring by advisors.

How we adapt to Generation Me in higher education will influence our future success as instructors. Understanding today's college students and the experiences they have had and the messages they have been given since birth will increase the professoriate's ability to create pedagogy that will be successful. Specifically being less judgmental will open up the ability to support this generation instead of working to change them. Allowing for development of positive traits and understanding of other not so positive behaviors will create trust and an enriched learning environment.

The consequences of not doing anything to bridge the generation gap between faculty and students is clear. If we ignore the problem and continue to do things like they have always been done regardless of the outcomes, higher education should be prepared to lose students and overall creditability. By understanding the characteristics of this generation of students, faculty can better serve them; and successfully answer the call of Whitehead's proclamation: the task of a university is the creation of the future (Whitehead, 1968).

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