

Five myths and realities about Generation Y

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The notion of generational differences has been around since society has been documented. The bible documents conflict between generations. In the 1950's, Elvis Presley's unashamed hip swivelling was surely going to be the end of society. Our parents did not understand us, and we struggle to understand why our children would prefer to spend hours on interactive video games instead of kicking a football in the park.

Our world is very different today from the world of our parents, grandparents and their parents, so it stands to reason that generations will adapt to a different world as well as influence the progress of the world.

Born between 1980 and 1994 (McRindle, 2006), these people are often characterised as being fickle, technology savvy, disrespectful of authority and over confident. In the workplace, tension often mounts as managers and co-workers are confronted by alien views of the world of work from a generation raised on technology and excesses. At university, lecturers are often taken aback by attitudes so foreign to their way of developing knowledge, they cannot reconcile the two. This paper explores some of the myths and ambiguities about Generation Y (Gen Y) to help understand their style and some strategies to help academics cope with Gen Y students in their classroom.

Keywords: teaching and learning, generation y, technology

Intended audience: Academics interested in understanding the diversity of the class cohort, in particular those wanting insight into what makes Gen Y tick.

Author biography

Jenny Devine has taught management at ECU for over ten years. Her teaching focuses on introductory management to both undergraduate and postgraduate students, in addition to areas of leadership and communication. Her teaching efforts have been recognised by many faculty awards, as well as the university Vice Chancellor's Award for Teaching Excellence. In 2010, she worked in the Centre for Learning and Development, supporting new teaching staff in developing their own teaching.

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Abstract

The notion of generational differences has been around since society has been documented. The bible tells stories of conflict between generations. In the 1950's, Elvis Presley's unashamed hip swivelling was surely going to be the end of society. Our parents did not understand us, and we struggle to understand why our children would prefer to spend hours on interactive video games instead of kicking a football in the park.

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Born between 1980 and 1994 (McRindle, 2006), these people are often characterised as being fickle, technology savvy, disrespectful of authority and over confident. In the workplace, tension often mounts as managers and fellow workers of older generations are confronted by alien views of the world of work from a generation raised on technology and excesses. At university, lecturers are often taken aback by attitudes so foreign to their way of developing knowledge, they cannot reconcile the two. This paper explores some of the myths and ambiguities about Gen Y to help understand their style and some strategies to help academics cope with Gen Y students in their classroom.

Introduction

The days of the "sage on the stage" have long gone! Information is so abundant that a single source of knowledge is a rare find. As a lecturer, we often find our ideas challenged by those we were traditionally expected to inform. A new generation of students brings with it a new generation of ideas and expectations of how learning occurs and how we should teach. It also brings with it new challenges preparing students for the workplace. It is indeed normal for misunderstanding and miscommunication to occur between generations. Some authors consider generational differences to be the greatest cause of diversity among both student groups and workplaces – greater than ethnicity, gender or language (Twenge & Campbell, 2008).

So with such diversity, how can learning in the tertiary classroom be enhanced? Understanding just what makes Gen Y tick, helps to enhance their learning experience.

Labelling age groups has become a popular method of identifying diversity amongst generations by grouping them according to their birth years. While the literature varies slightly among its exact dates, most classify Generation X as representing those born between 1961 and 1981. Those born prior to 1961 are deemed Baby Boomers, and those born after 1981 are Generation Y (Ahrin & Johnson Mallard, 2003; Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Literature on teaching Gen Y in higher education is scarce. Most literature focuses on Gen Y as consumers or as a new force in the workforce. Of course, university plays a significant role in developing both. Helping educators and employers distinguish some myths about Gen

Y will work towards creating a better learning environment. This position paper seeks to clarify some of the myths commonly held about Gen Y.

Myth 1: Gen Y are naturally adept at the use of technology

Gen Y has lived their whole lives surrounded by technology. They have been entertained by video, watched as a photograph taken of them immediately appears on a screen and seen money spew forth from a hole in the wall at the ubiquitous ATM simply in response to pressing a button. They are indeed digital natives.

It is easy to fall into the trap of believing that because Gen Y are “digital natives” that they are comfortable using all technologies we throw at them or indeed are good at it. Student understanding of technology is narrow and deep. They are often masters of text messaging and navigating Facebook, but may not be so fluent in using wikis, blogs or other shared document systems (Orlando, 2010).

However, lecturers are involved in a never-ending effort to keep Gen Y engaged in learning, and often believe the way to do so is by constantly re-inventing their teaching repertoire to include blogs, e-portfolios, web 2.0 tools and more to meet the needs of the digital natives that dominate the classroom.

From the moment a student makes the choice to attend university their life is directed, shaped and transformed by technology. They are required to look up course information on the university website; apply for a position via an electronic enrolment system; their phone enquiries are responded to by automated response system and their email queries are met with a highly efficient automated email response. They enrol in the unit of choice via the electronic unit enrolment system and receive an email from their lecturer welcoming them to the unit. When they finally attend their first class and meet a human (their lecturer) they are told to refer to all their unit requirements on the Learning Management System (such as Blackboard), prepare their assignment using the impressive library database and be sure to submit their assignment electronically via a plagiarism detection system (such as Turnitin).

While Gen Y are technology savvy, the expectation that they can automatically adjust to all the various systems they are faced with at university, in addition to such different teaching and assessment technologies (most of these teaching technologies are still not widely used in high schools) is not necessarily the case. Their understanding of technology is usually contained to social networking and entertainment. As young adults they are suddenly exposed to organisational processes that are dictated by automated responses rather than the world of face to face support that they are used to from their schools and their family. This can be overwhelming (Educating the net generation handbook, 2009). Add to this a whole new set of teaching and assessing technologies, Gen Y students often suffer cognitive overload.

Simply offering Gen Y the opportunity to utilise new technologies “does not guarantee student engagement with the task. Additional steps may need to be taken to encourage student engagement” (Educating the net generation handbook, 2009).

So, while they have been surrounded by technology, the way they have used technology, and the purpose it serves them has been quite different. It is important to continue to expand the use of technology in teaching (including assessing) but be wary of making the assumption that students will automatically pick up the technology. Like all other aspects of assessment

and learning tools, the use and expectations need to be quite clear and explicit for our students, without the assumption that they will just know.

Myth 2: Gen Y are the most social generation

Social interaction is a strong characteristic of Gen Y. They are constantly ‘connected’ and ‘in touch’ with others. They typically have access to technology that allows them to be part of a group at most times – either physically or virtually. They are typically team-oriented and prefer to study, socialise and travel in groups (Ricketts, 2009). For this generation, handling these activities with others lowers the pressure to perform as an individual and thereby increases confidence.

However, deep connections between individuals can be rare. While it is common for Gen Y to have 250 friends on Facebook, they can be slow to form highly trusting personal relationships.

This lack of deep trust affects their capacity and willingness to work collaboratively. Gen Y is used to dipping in and out of their social networks as suits them, and are rarely required to persist with a group situation if it does not suit their immediate needs (McRindle, 2006). This presents a challenge in the classroom and the workplace, where they may be required to work within a group on an assessment piece, but are not equipped to deal with conflicting goals of group members.

So, while they are surrounded by people, the skills required to develop group performance are often not well developed. In a teaching context, face to face socialisation skills need to be developed in addition to teamwork strategies to fully utilise the Gen Y propensity towards socialisation.

Myth 3: Gen Y are more confident than their parents and grandparents.

In many aspects of their life, Gen Y are a highly confident generation (Heany & Gleeson, 2008). They have been exposed to sophisticated environments, are well travelled and are used to eating at restaurants early in their lives. Their early school experiences include regular experiences via external excursions and constant opportunities to speak and perform in public through school assemblies and performances. They are given opportunities to dance, play musical instruments, try a wide variety of sport, and partake in drama and art in a way never so readily available to any previous generation.

Although they are exposed to confidence building activities early and constantly, they are also sheltered by over protective Baby Boomer parents (Ricketts, 2009). These ‘helicopter’ parents never miss an opportunity to watch the school assembly or the weekly soccer match. Parents of Gen Y are heavily involved in their activities and make arrangements including transport. If there is a problem at school, the Baby Boomer parents are already in the playground ready to fight the cause of their Gen Y offspring. So Gen Y have not had the opportunity to fight their own battles or make their own arrangements.

Gen Y consider themselves special. They have spent their childhood receiving a trophy for just turning up! The result is that Gen Y is used to being nurtured. When they enter an adult learning environment and are required to take responsibility for their own learning, the effect can be daunting. They are independently responsible for starting, completing and submitting assignments and they often falter along the way. As they are not used to fighting their own

battles, many would rather hide and use their anonymity at university, hoping their inability to handle all the new expectations that are required of them will slip through a bureaucratic crack, rather than speaking directly with their lecturer. These threatening figures often have a title like ‘Professor’ or ‘Doctor’, may have written a book and comfortably stand before a group of 350 people talking about concepts with supreme authority. They are obviously unapproachable on matters such as “how do I find a suitable reference” or “why do you refer to Blackboard when we only use whiteboards?”

While Gen Y exude supreme confidence that Gen X and Baby Boomers may have taken a lifetime acquiring, this can be in relation to *some* aspects of their life only (McRindle, 2006). As an educator, it is important to remember that many basic tasks have often been done for them and now thrown into a completely new environment – adult learning - they may not wish to compromise their air of confidence by asking seemingly inane questions (Tresize-Brown, 2004)

Myth 4: Gen Y – the information generation

Gen Y are drawn to new information as if it were a bright shiny object. Their connected world gives them ease of access to information and material on demand. The quick access to material leads to a “cut and paste” methodology. A study conducted with nursing students (Ahrin, 2009) suggested Gen Y find distinctions between academic misconduct and efficient researching difficult to conceptualise. Students rely heavily on the internet and rarely see acknowledgement or referencing there, so it does not form part of their reality. Gen Y believe that scanning information and adding (via cut and paste) to their assignments is efficient use of resources.

Generation Y are exposed to more information than any generation before them, but in many ways do not know how to make sense of this overload of data. Marketing information is presented in much the same way as any other information. Current affairs, entertainment news and medical information can all be accessed in the same way, making it difficult to determine the difference in levels of credibility (Nimon, 2006). How equipped are Gen Y to intelligently discern between marketing and fact? The mere creation of the notion of the infomercial blurs the boundary.

Aligning authority to information has therefore become more difficult. In the past, if a book was published, this was an indication that the content was written with some authority and was significant. Now, information is readily available at everyone’s fingertips. The world wide web is the definitive authority on everything from medical diagnosis to what to cook for dinner. Sources like Wikipedia are highly valued by Gen Y as they clearly and succinctly provide us with instant answers, yet little attention is paid to the accuracy or authenticity of the information (Nimon, 2006).

University learning has long been associated with deep learning and critical thinking. Extensive reading was the badge of honour worn by university graduates. Today, Gen Y are characterised as ‘surfers and scanners’ of information, rather than readers and viewers (Arhin & Johnson-Mallard, 2003). This style of information access may raise conflict with the traditions of higher education.

So, the university classroom is littered with students comfortably surrounded with ever increasing information, yet they are typically reluctant to use this information in the way traditionally viewed as valuable by academics. The challenge may be to re-think the way

university presents information, values information and encourages and assesses learning, to merge yesterday's thinking with tomorrow's expectations.

Myth 5: Gen Y have a short attention span

The concept of time is something that sets Gen Y apart from other generations. Their connectivity day and night means that they have a different concept of 'time'. Gen Y sleep with their mobile phone nestled against their bed. They send an email to a lecturer at midnight and expect a response early the next day (often so they can complete their assignment requirements that afternoon). Therefore the notion of a 'timely response' may be widely varied in its interpretation.

Certainly, the idea of permanency is not viewed the same by Gen Y. Their parents took comfort in the prospect of a lifelong relationship, a job for life and a home for life. Gen Y has seen divorce rates escalate and jobs being made redundant at an accelerating rate, as a result their social context is changing. Nimon (2006) goes on to highlight that long term is not easily accepted by Gen Y. They live for today and prefer immediacy. Twelve months is long term. This means they prefer immediate responses and immediate outcomes. Gen Y do not necessarily link the benefits of higher education with job prospects as that is too far into the future. The value of education is in more immediate terms such as personal fulfilment, networking, relationships and skills.

Gen Y expect to change their work many times throughout their lives. They tend to be loyal to their manager, but not necessarily their organisation (Generation Y in the workplace Australia, 2007; Twenge & Campbell, 2008). The practice of long service leave will probably become redundant very soon.

So, Gen Y often lack trust in long term outcomes. They have seen things they are attached to change and change again – their family, their school, their friends. They are often wary of positions of responsibility and are reluctant to commit. This impacts on the nature of their career prospects and this directly relates to their experience in higher education. Things change so quickly in their world. If not interested, their attention span is short and their interest to applying concepts in the future is low (Heaney & Gleeson, 2008). Consider a typical Gen Y student. During their three years at university, they are likely to have changed their mobile phone at least twice. They get bored easily and seek short term satisfaction and outcomes. This impacts greatly on how learning takes place and how they will approach their work life.

However, although Gen Y may lose interest in things older generations preserved with (continuing in a dull job until earning the experience to move into a better one; reading a novel), things will hold their interest for a long time – if they are engaged. Gen Y will participate eagerly in an all-night movie marathon and can be seen spending hours at a games console.

Conclusion

Working with Gen Y in the classroom and in the workplace is an exciting prospect. Certainly there are challenges of difference, but probably no more than with any previous mix of generations.

Gen Y certainly are a generation full of contradictions. Their love of technology does not always extend to learning tools and automated systems; their desire to be surrounded by people has often led to them to be socially inept; their confidence applies to only some aspects of their life and prevents them from asking for support; their exposure to such a high volume of information has left them not well equipped to make discerning judgements about the quality of that information and lastly; their short term outlook has changed the way they learn and work, but they still remain focused on a task when they are deeply engaged.

This generation will often lack trust, but they have been exposed to a sophisticated world from an early age and are keen to take their place in it. They expect respect, often because of their confidence and often because of what they perceive as wide access to knowledge. Further research needs to be undertaken to establish a better fit between what motivates GenY and how they learn with the methods adopting in communicating with them and teaching them. While they have some exceptional skills, Gen Y still need to be guided through the maze of taking their place in the world, probably like every generation before them. Since the days of Socrates, differences between generations has been highlighted.

Children nowadays are tyrants- they gobble their food, contradict their parents, and tyrannise their teachers!

Socrates, 425BC19

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