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Riding the Technological Rapids with the Millennials

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Defining Millennials

The Millennial Generation is generally agreed to be those born between approximately 1982 and 2002. Neil Howe and Bill Strauss are credited with coining the term Millennials, as well as generally defining the birth years of this generation in their book *Millennials rising: the next great generation*. A few others disagree and define this generation as starting as early as 1979 or as late as 1984; additionally, there are even those who define the Millennial generation as ending as early as 1994.

There is no easy way to define a generation. In the past, many have used the change in birth statistics to define generations, but there are other ways to confirm the birth years of any particular generation that may make more sense (Howe and Strauss, 2000, p. 40). One of the most interesting is to define generations based on what experiences they missed.

Boomers for example, are the generation whose eldest members (born in 1943) have no memory of VJ day. Gen Xers are the generation whose eldest members (born in 1961) have no memory of John Kennedy’s assassination. Millennials are the generation whose eldest members (born in 1982) have no memory of sitting in school watching the Challenger shuttle explode (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 47).

While none of the sources have explicitly stated such, it is fairly safe to assume that the post-Millennial generation will likely be defined as the generation whose eldest members will have no memory of the events of 9/11.

In addition, while many if not most people have finally come to agree to call this generation the Millennials (which is based on the preferences of members of the generation when polled) (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 6), there are several other names that they have been given by various sources: “Next Gen,” the “Net Gen,” and “Generation Y.”

Millennial Characteristics and Tendencies

Millenials are first of all the largest generation: 76 million as of the end of the year 2000 (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 14). The Millennials are also a diverse generation. Howe and Strauss describe “a contrast between two sets of kids: those with two income Boomer parents … and those with one income Gen-X parents” (p. 109). This of course has contributed to the “digital divide” (the gap between those with access to technology and those without), and is why, despite Millennials being associated with new technology, one can never assume that all Millennials have had high exposure to technology. 2.4 million Millennials are immigrants, while an additional 4 million have parents who are immigrants, (p. 83) which has contributed to Millennials being the most racially diverse generation thus far (p. 15).

Millennials are also a sheltered and supervised generation. Much of this is due to a shift in attitudes towards children, including the attitudes that resulted in the increased generational numbers. Parents wanted more children than the generation before them, and trips to fertility clinics skyrocketed with the onset of the Millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 35). There was a distinct change in “parenting philosophy in the early 80s – instead of seeking their own personal good, parents turned their attention towards their kids, and ‘latchkey children’ became, for the most part, a thing of the past” (Sanchez, 2003). “Todays adults define themselves in terms of their children” (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 110) and have “inculcated in Millennials the sense that they are, collectively, vital to the nation and to their parents’ sense of purpose” (p. 43). This is seen in the attention paid to the Millennial generation when compared with Generation X. Generation X was not even given its name until the first of its members were turning 30 (p. 43). Comparatively, Millennials have been in the spotlight from a much earlier time,
beginning with the news reports early on about the “Class of 2000” (aka the first birth year of the Millennials – 1982). Millennials get along with their parents far better than previous generations have, perhaps contributing to the rise of the “helicopter parent” as they don’t mind their parents getting involved in their business. They were the “focus of the most sweeping youth safety movement in American history” beginning with the rise of child safety devices in the 80s, continuing through the post-Columbine focus on school safety (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 43).

Millennials are a confident and optimistic generation of achievers. While it may be debated by some, rising test scores have occurred among Millennials, more kids than ever say they like school, and a larger percentage are taking Advanced Placement courses (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 9). Most Millennials want to do well in school and anticipate doing so, however their study habits do not always correspond with these goals. In addition, Millennials tend to be collaborators. Brought up on Sesame Street and Barney, they have learned collaboration from an early age. “Even those who do not prefer collaboration, typically do so if they think it gives them a practical advantage” (Sweeney, 2006). These achieving characteristics and the circumstances that go along with them have led to another characteristic of Millennials – they are stressed. Pressured to do well in school by all the adults around them, they are also involved in ever increasing activities outside of school – mostly with their families or in other adult-supervised activities (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 173).

Finally, Millennials are an impatient generation that has grown up multitasking. Much of this is due to the culture into which they have been born. Thanks to technology, we all expect faster and faster computers and Internet, and as David Shenk has said, “we’ve managed to compress time to such an extent that we’re now painfully aware of every second that we wait for anything” (Shenk, 1999, p. 41). Millennials are at ease with multitasking, quite happy to be chatting via IM and listening to music while doing their homework (Oblinger, 2003, p.40). Millennials dislike waiting because it is “unproductive,” as Sweeney has said, “Their desire for speed and efficiency cannot be over estimated” (Sweeney, 2006). Millennials want to learn quickly and move on (Sweeney, 2006). To this Marc Prensky adds “Is it that Digital Natives [those who have grown up with current technology] can’t pay attention or that they choose not to?” and suggests that students may not be paying attention in class due to their feeling that their time is being wasted (Prensky, 2001).

**Generation Me? Or a “Generation of Change?”**

One highly publicized study entitled “Egos Inflating Over Time” has found Millennials to be the most narcissistic generation. According to the researchers, “30 percent more college students showed “elevated narcissism” in 2006 compared with 1982,” which led the researchers to conclude that “current college students [are] more narcissistic than baby boomers and Gen-Xers” (Quoted in Collins, 2007). However many have found issues with this study. Howe and Strauss were one of the most vocal in disagreeing with this study; and even claim that boomers themselves might be responsible for the results of the study: “Thanks to boomers, a vocabulary of self-love so permeates today’s schools and media that professors such as Twenge [the lead author of the report] can now blame kids for repeating it back to them on personality tests” (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Additionally, according to one survey, teenagers blamed selfishness for the cause of most problems in the United States (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p.8). Howe and Strauss later go on to ask “are today’s kids more vulgar, sexually active, and violent than adults would like? In some ways, yes. But Millennials are less vulgar, less sexually active, less violent than the youth culture adults have created for them” (pp. 18–19). Howe and Strauss are certainly not the only ones to disagree with the idea that this generation is “damaged” or “selfish.” Steven Abram has said “we must discard the idea that this is somehow a damaged generation. It is largely a myth that they are performing more poorly in their education ...” (Abram, 2006) and David Sarasohn, a writer for the San Fransisco Examiner has written, “The scariest
thing about kids today is how adults feel about them” (Quoted in Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 24).

Growing Up with Technology

Millennials were born around the time the personal computer was introduced, and twenty percent began using computers at the early ages of 5-8, while “virtually all students were using computers” by the ages of 16-18 (Oblinger, 2003, p.39). These statistics are even higher for today’s children. “Computers are not technology” – when one has grown up with a certain technology, it is an accepted part of typical life, so Millennials do not consider computers and the Internet to be “technology” (Oblinger, 2003, p.40). Marc Prensky coined the term “Digital Natives” to describe those who have grown up with this technology, and as such are all “native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet” (Prensky, 2001). However there is debate as to whether Millennials are actually “technologically competent” or just confident in their abilities (Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006).

A Generational Thing? Or Caused by Exposure to Technology?

One of the most distinctive of these Millennial tendencies, multitasking (and related tendencies associated with technology) may not even be truly generational. Diana Oblinger comments that “Although these trends are described in generational terms, age may be less important than exposure to technology. For example, individuals who are heavy users of IT tend to have characteristics similar to the Net Gen” (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005, p. 2.9).

Why Millennials Need Librarians More than Ever

Millennial Carie Windham comments that the “core principles of information literacy – access, evaluation, use – crisscross with nearly every technology that the average college student will use on a daily basis, even those used for managing their personal lives” (Windham, 2006, p. 4). Thus Millennials need librarians more than ever because they live in a changing world of information overload. “To be human is to traffic in enormous chunks of data,” says David Shenk, who continues, “at a certain level of input the glut becomes a cloud of data smog that no longer adds to our quality of life but instead begins to cultivate stress, confusion, and even ignorance” (Shenk, 2007, p. 20). This is the world in which Millennials live, and no wishful thinking on the part of librarians is going to be able to change this, so we must help them gain the skills they need to succeed in this new world. The “half-life” of information is shorter than ever, and as such the emphasis must move from knowing to “doing” (Oblinger, 2003, p.40).

Students turn to the web because it is easy and it is what they know. “Instead of venturing out to explore these technologies [older library technologies such as microfilm and paper archives] the average student will merely turn to the web, often embarrassed to ask for help or clueless about where to look” (Windham, 2006, p.5). This is one of the reasons that so many students will limit themselves to the web, or to those articles in a database that are full text. This isn’t limited to Millennials for this reason – most college students, traditional or not traditional, will pick the easy source. It is of course related to the Millennial tendency for multitasking and speed – after all finding their information from the comfort of their dorm room while doing other things would be time more “productively” spent than physically going to the library.

Finally we must be teaching students how to do proper research due to the ease of plagiarism in a world of cut and paste. Plagiarism can be a temptation to this generation of achievers. Plagiarism is easier than ever with the Internet, and is now able to be done without even considering the material. As Todd Oppenheimer has said regarding plagiarism in the past, “Even if a student borrows liberally from those documents [print resources], the act of physically transcribing the material requires that he read and think about it, at least temporarily word for word ... that physical task forces a student to run the material through his head, which gives its meaning a chance to stick” (Oppenheimer, 2004, p. 100). Oppenheimer is not suggesting that plagiarism was right in the past – but rather that at least students still had the opportunity to have learned something
when they plagiarized. But the ability to cut and paste information from online has made it much easier for students to plagiarize, and not learn anything in the process. An increase in plagiarism should not be a shock, despite other positive Millennial tendencies, when one considers “their technological savvy and access to information, undreamed of by Boomers when they were in college, are a temptation in which achievement is put up against integrity” (DeBard, 2004, p. 43).

Library Considerations

Is there a gap between Millennial expectations and library services? We need to know what they actually do expect – not just what we think they expect – do they really want blogs and podcasts or do they just expect a library catalog that is easy to use? Do they feel “limited by library culture rather than technology?” (McDonald & Thomas, 2006, p.5). In addition, “Libraries might need to change their mindset of employing the most sophisticated software that enables features they believe could provide improved service [pushing web pages in chat reference for example] ... in preference for software that students are more likely to use [already existing Instant Messenger programs]” (Lippencott, 2005, p. 13.8). And we must remember that the more we push for information to be online, the more uncomfortable our students become with the previous technologies and traditional sources (Windham, 2006, p. 5). This is unavoidable as we strive to meet the needs of all our users, both on campus and for increasing numbers of distance education students (and online resources certainly fill that need) but we must remember that it does come with a price.

The answer isn’t always technology: David Shenk suggests that one can be a “technology critic” without being anti-technology: “We are technology ‘critics’ in the same way, and for the same reasons, that others are food critics, art critics, or literary critics” (Shenk, 1999, p. 142). We can be enthusiastic about those technologies that are good and helpful while thinking critically about technology in general. Technology should be a means to better library service, not an end in itself.

REFERENCES


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