

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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When Motivating Generation Y in the Classroom

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I have noticed a frequent lament among my university professor colleagues that the quality of students is dropping rapidly. This newest generation of students has been described as impatient, incurious, unmotivated, and in possession of a belief that they are entitled to large rewards for small amounts of effort. Many faculty seem to believe that students increasingly view the classroom as an assembly-line. To better understand our students' changing values, attitudes, and beliefs, we need to understand their upbringing and environment. This essay examines how our students may be changing, and provides suggestions for how faculty can adapt to be successful in this new educational environment

Who is Generation Y? Some Demographics

Born between 1980 and 1992, Generation Y is three times the size of Generation X in number, and is approximately the same size as the Baby Boomer Generation numbering approximately 65 million. Aliases of Generation Y include Gen Why, Gen NeXt, NeXters, Echo-boomers, and the Net Generation. They are currently 14 – 26 years of age, one in three is not Caucasian, and they will comprise approximately 45% of the full-time labor force by the year 2010 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004).

Students are Products of Their Environment

Our Generation Y students have grown up in an environment that is significantly different from what prior generations have experienced, and as a result, their view of the world is fundamentally different from

the faculty perspective. These students have developed in an environment that possesses unprecedented levels of media saturation and technology. Two-thirds of Gen Y students used computers by the age of 5, and they are exposed to an average of 8 hours of media every day (in contrast to spending 2 hours with parents and 50 minutes doing homework). In their television worlds, they have adapted to an environment of quick-cut stimuli from being bombarded by commercials tailored to short attention-spans. The advertising that is pervasive throughout their environment is tailored to providing them messages that they want to hear, and are usually geared towards getting Gen Y to define themselves and establish their individual identity through some form of product consumption. They have never known a world without a television remote control, cell phones, an ATM, or the internet. Generation Y has developed expectations for instant gratification - the internet for information and entertainment, cell phones and instant messaging for communication, and websites such as facebook.com for dating. They have been described as the “Nintendo Generation”, whereby reinforcement is received at rates 50-100 times what faculty are used to delivering.

The Challenges

As a result of their development within this environment, Gen Y has arguably developed a number of distinctive traits. The overwhelming amount of media messages that they have received in their lifetimes has led to them to develop a significant level of skepticism towards any information that they receive. They have well-honed “BS” detectors, and, increasingly, they question the validity of the messages received from faculty. The media-generated messages catering to adolescent desires for individualism and self-expression manifest themselves in students’ preference for self-expression over self-control, and in what I have heard faculty refer to as an “arrogant, brazen, entitled attitude” amongst students of this generation. Their media heroes are a reflection of this attitude, represented by Eminem, Allen Iverson, Mike Vick, to “extreme” sports and snowboarders/skateboarders. They consider themselves to be free-wheeling individualists, with a disdain for authority and convention—more so than previous generations. A 2007 study by UCLA found a 30% increase in narcissism among university students in 2006 as compared to university students in 1982 (Twenge, Konrath, Forster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2007).

Their media-saturated environment has also led to an increased student expectation for instant and positive results for any efforts that they undertake. They spend ½ as much time on homework as do students in France, Italy, Russia, and South America, and they spend ½ as much time as did prior generations in the U.S. Self-reported cheating behavior is also at an all-time high. Many faculty have witnessed a “gold star” mentality amongst Gen Y students, whereby rewards are available to all, if only loosely linked to effort or accomplishment. Rather than expecting to adapt to their work and academic environments, they seem to expect their environments to adapt to them. Some evidence of this effect is that Gen Y has thus far achieved the highest workplace turnover rate of any generation in U.S. history (for 20-24 year olds the annual turnover rate was 54%, for 16-19 it was 78%) (SHRM, 2004). If they become dissatisfied with the involvement and/or rewards of a particular experience, they are likely to quit.

The Benefits

Although this seems to present a depressing educational environment for faculty, in my experience, there is some good news. As a result of the overwhelming amount of positive feedback that they have received in their lives, in my opinion, these students are bursting with self-esteem and optimism. They want to “believe” in order to commit their efforts, but if not “sold”, they respond with indifference. They are goal and achievement-oriented, energized by ideas, entrepreneurial-minded and willing to take risks. The stimulus-oriented artificial environments in which they were raised have made Gen Y adept at multi-tasking, fast thinking, and creativity. They have also become techno-savvy, and are very communicative. Although highly independent, I have noticed in my classroom that this generation possesses an intense desire to connect with other people, and collaborate (they have one of the highest rates of volunteerism among the generations).

How to Teach to Gen Y

What is needed is a model to help faculty understand how to best meet the needs of our techno-savvy Gen Y student workers. I use the term worker, as I believe that they increasingly view their experience in a classroom in a way which is similar to having a “job”, or a

specific duty, role, or function that they are expected to accomplish. In the organizational psychology literature, Hackman and Oldham (1980) created a model oriented towards creating more engaging jobs, with the outcomes including increased motivation, satisfaction, and performance of employees. A large body of research has developed in support of their model, and its particular strength is that it examines the core features of work as seen from the perspective of the worker (or student) (Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). Thus, it provides a theoretical framework to analyze how to improve student outcomes from their perspective, and the students are (arguably) most attuned to what motivates them to perform. The core job characteristics model asserts five independent constructs important to one's work satisfaction, motivation, and performance: skill variety, task identity, significance, autonomy, and feedback. If we apply this model to our Gen Y students, I believe we see the following suggestions for faculty:

Skill Variety – GenY likes to multitask. They see themselves as “internal customers” and they need engagement and involvement (if not entertainment). They are active-experimentation oriented, they want to experience more than passively observe. I suggest using Socratic method and case studies when possible, building teams, holding debates, building active-engagement websites, and challenging them to use their technological skills to solve problems.

Task Identity and Significance – Gen Y desperately wants to feel that what they are doing is meaningful and important. Provide connections with the world that they are living in as frequently as possible to maximize the salience of your subject. Serve as a role model, and emphasize the functional benefits of learning the material every day. Explain the “why” of what you’re asking them to do, and explain what’s in it for them. Try to back up what you say with real-world verifiable proof. Many of them are searching for identity, and faculty could view this as an opportunity to help them to affiliate/find meaning in your classroom and subject.

Autonomy - Within limits, let them express individuality in their work. Be wary of one-size-fits-all teaching approaches. They

often refuse to blindly conform to traditional standards and time-honored institutions. Try to provide a flexible, fun classroom, and don't be too rigid. They chafe at many stepped processes and bureaucracy, and they are not so comfortable with rigid routines. Reconsider squishing them into pre-existing classroom molds, they don't want to feel like they are a cog in a boilerplate classroom. Interact with them, update your class, and customize where possible. Try to enable self-expression and autonomy in the classroom.

Feedback - Get them involved quickly - they want to get up to speed fast and contribute. Think of the Nintendo game: expectations are clear, behavior is continually measured and feedback is consistently provided on performance, and they receive high rates of reinforcement to motivate them to keep playing. Provide frequent performance feedback (like weekly quizzes, activities and presentations in the classroom, and other high-involvement activities).

Final Thoughts

Each generation faces its own set of expectations and challenges, and higher education has adapted to provide the necessary skills. As faculty, we should try to see the world through the eyes of Generation Y, and be willing to learn from our students. They are growing up in a fast-paced, technological, outcome-oriented environment, and they expect their higher education experience to provide them with the skills that they need to prosper in such an environment. Consider this generation an opportunity to question and enhance your approach to teaching, and reduce the bureaucracy of your classroom. Let's turn to our students and ask for involvement to provide creative, hands-on solutions to problems. We should strive to cultivate their positive attitude, willingness to work, and challenge them to solve the unanswered problems in our disciplines.

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