

How Can I Create Effective Mini-lectures?

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Recently, a great deal of attention has been focused on the new Generation Y or Millennial generation of learners born between 1981 and 1999. Although there is an abundance of available literature describing the traits of Millennials, little has been written regarding how these characteristics impact the teaching and learning process. In order to better meet the needs of Millennial students, Christy Price explores perceptions of Millennial learners regarding their ideal professors, their preferred learning environments, and the implications for teaching Millennial learners.

Why Don't My Students Think I'm Groovy? The New "R"s for Engaging Millennial Learners

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Ask colleagues who have taught undergraduates for a decade or more if students have changed, and they will typically respond with a resounding, "YES!" My interest in this new breed of students was piqued when I began to notice unrealistically high expectations of success among my students combined with an astonishingly low level of effort on their part. After having read the "Bible" on assessment, Angelo and Cross's *Classroom Assessment Techniques*, I began to more regularly embed formative assessments in the courses I taught. One of these assessments turned out to be particularly valuable. After the first major assessment or exam, I asked students to anonymously respond to the following four questions:

1. What did you do to prepare for the exam?
2. Considering what you did to prepare for the exam, what grade did you expect to earn?
3. What will you do differently in preparing for the next exam?
4. Is there anything I can do to assist you in preparing for the next exam?

In response to the first question, students offered up surprisingly candid admissions. For example, they replied, "*I read parts of the chapter*" and "*I looked over my notes the night before and reviewed during my class that meets right before.*" There was the classic commuter student response: "*I looked over my notes in the car before coming to class,*" and my personal favorite "*I'm going to do much better next time, now that I bought the book.*" Now that I bought the book! This student sat through three weeks of class and took the first exam without purchasing the required text! The most astonishing part of all of this was when these students were asked what grade they expected to earn, they confidently listed an A or a B.

The gap that existed between students' level of effort and their expectation of success was only one of many Generation Y or Millennial issues thwarting my efforts to change the world through molding young minds, so I did what any other self-respecting teacher of psychology would do: I expressed my negative emotions through interpretive dance and went to the literature! In my search, I discovered a wealth of information describing the characteristics of Generation Y Millennials (born between 1981 and 1999) and their hovering parents. Howe & Strauss (2007) described Millennials as wanted children who grew up central to their parents' sense of purpose. They have often been sheltered by helicopter parents, a practice that tends to extend the students' adolescence and delay their development of independence. At the same time, they have been

overscheduled with extracurricular activities for most of their childhood, leaving them feeling pressured to achieve and sometimes unable to focus on one task at a time. In her book *Generation Me* (2006), Jean Twenge described Generation Y as the first generation to be fully raised in the aftermath of the technological revolution in which information has been readily available to them with the click of a mouse. This environment has driven them to be demanding educational consumers with no tolerance for delay. In addition, Twenge found that Generation Y youth are more likely to seek wealth as opposed to meaning and purpose in life; therefore, they typically view their college education as a means to an end. For these reasons, Generation Y Millennials often fail to see the value of a liberal arts education. Finally, this generation finds social rules less important and they have become very informal in their writing, speaking, dress, and interactions with authority figures. This generational shift has undeniably increased incivility in the classroom.

Although there is an abundance of information focused on the traits of Millennials, very little has been published regarding how these characteristics impact the teaching and learning process. One exception is Ellen Pastorino's 2006 E-xcellence essay "*When Generations Collide in the Classroom*" in which she makes a case for understanding generational differences and their potential impact on our teaching. In keeping with Pastorino's assertion, I conducted a qualitative analysis of narratives provided by more than a hundred Millennial learners. What I uncovered was truly enlightening, and it transformed my teaching.

Over the past year, I have maintained an almost dizzying schedule of invited addresses and faculty development workshops sharing the findings of this research on the Millennial learner. Al Gore has his *Inconvenient Truth*, and I have mine – whether we like it or not, the Millennial learner is the new generation of student that we must influence, inspire, and serve. So take heed, and be warned! There may be moments during the reading of this essay when you become irate, vehemently protest, and perhaps even secretly plot to slash the tires of my minivan! At these moments, it is important to bring yourself back to a peaceful place with a Tantric Chant or an herbal tea and remember that as the author of this article, I am simply sharing what Millennial learners have offered up and so desperately wish for us to hear.

The student narratives I collected focused on four main areas and provided Millennial student perceptions regarding:

1. professors who were familiar with Millennial student culture versus those who were not
2. their ideal professor
3. their ideal learning environment
4. their ideal assessments and assignments.

Student Perceptions of Professors Who Are Familiar With Millennial Culture Versus Those Who Are Not

In distinguishing between professors perceived as familiar with Millennial culture versus those who are not, Millennial learners noted the following differences:

1. **Techno-Savvy**: Millennials view a professor's ability to effectively utilize technology as an indicator of his or her connectedness to their culture. In fact, when asked to write about professors perceived as unfamiliar with Millennial culture, one student wrote in frustration, "*My professor is not up to date with technology. He is still confused about how to work the VCR!*"

2. **Currently Relevant:** Use of “*real*,” “*relevant*,” and “*current*” examples was one of the most obvious themes apparent among professors perceived as connected to Millennial culture. As one student commented, “*Use of old shows like Taxi are not practical references that the average college student can relate to.*”
3. **Minimally Lecturing:** Of all the themes apparent in Millennial students’ differentiation between professors perceived as connected to Millennial culture versus those who were not, I was most surprised to see Millennials view our teaching methods as an indicator of our connection to their culture. Respondents perceived professors who involved them in class with a variety of methods (as opposed to only lecture) as more connected to Millennial culture.
4. **Seriously Humorous:** Surprisingly, Millennials associated our tone of voice as an indicator of our lack of connection to their culture. Instructors perceived as “*boring*” or “*monotone*” were seen as lacking connection to Millennial culture. I realize this is disheartening news to those of us who are innately boring and suffer from monotonucleosis. To make matters worse, respondents perceived professors to be more connected to Millennial culture when they used “*humor*” and, dare I quote the other word they used, “*fun.*”
5. **Relaxed & Relatable:** Respondents perceived professors who “*listened*,” “*related*,” and “*talked to students about their lives*,” as connected to Millennial culture and perceived those professors who were “*unattached*” or solely focused on course content as not connected to Millennial culture. As one respondent lamented about her biology professor, “*...he doesn’t really talk about anything that we are interested in... he only talks about strictly class stuff and he won’t go off onto anything else... he doesn’t seem like he is into anything but scientific things.*” Imagine that, a biology professor who wants to talk about science!

Millennials also identified professors they perceived as “*down-to-earth*,” “*informal*,” “*relaxed*,” and “*flexible*,” as connected to the Millennial culture; while those described as “*uptight*,” “*strict*,” “*intimidating*,” or “*condescending*” were perceived as not connected to Millennial culture. In general, Millennials seem to strongly resist authoritarian power structure. Respondents relayed numerous examples of what they viewed as rigid course policies and harsh reactions on the part of the professors perceived as not connected with their culture. Student responses such as “*if you forget to turn off your cell phone and it rings, it’s like you’re the devil*” and “*my professor locks us out if we are late and does not allow us to wear hats*” perfectly illustrate key generational differences between a mainly Baby Boomer professoriate and a new Millennial generation of learners.

The Millennials’ Ideal Professor

Most surprising of all the findings of my study on Millennial learners were their perceptions regarding the ideal professor. The Top Five List below summarizes respondents’ views. Millennials feel that the ideal professor should be:

5. “*energetic*,” “*enthusiastic*,” and “*upbeat*” with a “*positive attitude*”
I know upon reading the student quotes above, some of you may suddenly feel nauseous. Or perhaps, like me, the very thought of students desiring me to be “*upbeat*” drains my energy. The audacity of it all!!!

4. “*open-minded*” and “*flexible*”
Unfortunately, students are not using the term “flexible” in the physical “Pilates” sense, as they desire flexibility in assignments, course policy, and our interactions with them.
3. alert as to whether students understand
2. “*nice,*” “*friendly,*” “*caring,*” and “*helpful.*”

If all this is not disturbing enough, the number one characteristic of the Millennials’ ideal professor is:

1. “*approachable*” and “*easy to talk to.*”

It is hard to believe that what these students basically want is for us to be decent individuals who are responsive to them! As the sarcasm begins to drip from the page, it is important to note that I did ask for Millennials’ views of the “IDEAL” professor. We should at least give them credit for not expecting us all to have flaming chili peppers at ratemyprofessor.com. Upon further analysis of their responses, what is most intriguing is not what is on their list, but perhaps what is missing. In other words, they seem to care more about who we are and how we interact with them, than they care about what we know. This is not to suggest that our knowledge of subject and pedagogical expertise are insignificant, but perhaps they are simply a minimal qualification Millennials expect from all of us. What is painfully obvious is Millennial learners’ responses suggest they highly value positive interactions with their professors.

The assertion that positive student-teacher interaction and relationships yield untold benefits can be found throughout the literature on effective teaching and learning (Bain, 2004; Brookfield, 1990; Schultz & Marchuk, 2006; Weimer, 2002). More specifically, affinity-seeking behaviors which increase liking and rapport have been positively correlated with students’ motivation to learn and their perceptions that they had learned (Daly & Kreiser, 1992). This research brings me to what is clearly the most painful portion of the faculty development workshops I conduct. Based on a series of affinity-seeking strategies created by Bell and Daly (1984) and first applied to teaching by McCroskey and McCroskey (1986), I created an interactive Rapport Building Checklist as a tool for college instructors’ self-assessment. As participants in my workshops, college instructors assess to what extent they exhibit affinity-seeking behaviors such as enthusiasm, altruism, sensitivity, supportiveness, trustworthiness, and openness. Other items on the scale include assuming equality, promoting similarity, eliciting other’s disclosure, keeping social rules, and presenting an interesting self. For those of us who just aren’t very interesting, there is hope, as affinity-seeking theorists suggest that these behaviors can be intentionally generated and developed over time (Gorham et al; 1989). Nonetheless, when professors are confronted with this self-assessment in a workshop, there is always one or two who seem to be very “put out” by the assertion that we should have to “build rapport” with our students. If you have these same thoughts, keep in mind that Millennials are extremely relational and they simply desire a connection with us. We can build a positive rapport with students while still maintaining healthy and respectful boundaries.

The Millennials' Ideal Learning Environment

The Top Five List below summarizes Millennials' perceptions regarding their ideal learning environment. Millennials felt the ideal learning environment was one in which the following elements were present.

5. "*Students know one another*" and "*work together in groups.*"
This is consistent with Millennials' team orientation, interdependence, and desire for connection.
4. Learning is "*relaxed,*" "*enjoyable,*" and that awful "F" word we dread hearing... "*fun.*"
3. A "*multimedia*" format is utilized, including podcasts, on-line activities, video, powerpoint, etc.
2. "*Real examples*" that are "*relevant*" to their culture are used.

The number one characteristic Millennial respondents desired in an ideal learning environment was that it be:

1. "*Interactive*" and "*participatory.*"

Interestingly, the most consistent theme present in the analysis of the Millennial responses was they preferred a variety of teaching methods, as opposed to a "*lecture only*" format. It is important to note that these Millennial students did not attack the lecture method altogether, but they had strongly negative perceptions of learning environments in which lecture was the only method used. According to one Millennial respondent, "*If you lecture all throughout the time then we get bored. If you are constantly changing from lecture, to discussion, to group work, that helps a lot. It helps keep us awake and we learn more. Stuff gets into our head better.*"

Millennials' Ideal Assessments and Assignments

When asked to describe their ideal assessments or assignments, several of the Millennial students left this particular section of the survey blank, perhaps suggesting their idea of ideal assessment would be no assessment at all. The apparent themes among the responses I did receive suggested Millennials prefer a variety of assessments given regularly throughout the semester, as opposed to simply having two major assessments in the form of a mid-term and final. They also expressed a preference for "*experiential*" and "*relevant*" assessments. Finally, although there has been concern surrounding use of extrinsic reinforcers to motivate students (Deci & Ryan, 1987), the most significant theme among Millennials' descriptions of their ideal assessments and assignments was that they be "*graded*" and therefore, incorporated into the point structure or grading system for the course. This mindset that one should be extrinsically rewarded for any time, effort, or contribution is in keeping with the "*everyone gets a trophy*" culture in which Millennials were raised. This became very personally apparent to me a little over a year ago when my own five-year-old informed me he would "*give me a sticker*" if I helped him clean his room.

Summary

In presenting on this topic, I often summarize the main themes of this research with the following five new “R” s for engaging the Millennial:

1. **Relevance**: Millennials do not typically value information for information’s sake. One of the greatest challenges of the professoriate will be to connect course content to the current culture, and make learning outcomes and activities relevant to Millennial learners and their future.
2. **Rationale**: Unlike Boomers who were raised in a more authoritarian manner in which they more readily accept the chain of command, Millennials were raised in a non-authoritarian manner and are more likely to conform, comply, and adhere to course policies when they are provided with a rationale.
3. **Relaxed**: Millennials thrive in a less formal, more comfortable learning environment in which they can informally interact with the professor and one another.
4. **Rapport**: Millennials are extremely relational. They are more central to their parents’ lives than previous generations and are used to having the adults in their lives show great interest in them. They appreciate it when professors show that same interest, and they seem to be more willing to pursue learning outcomes when we connect with them on a personal level.
5. **Research-Based Methods**: Millennials have grown up in an era in which they were constantly engaged. When they are not interested, their attention quickly shifts elsewhere. This research suggests Millennials prefer a variety of active learning methods, as opposed to a more traditional lecture-only format.

Conclusion

Clearly, meeting the needs of Millennial learners is a topic still under study, yet I highly encourage you to apply these initial findings to your practice in the classroom. I regularly receive enthusiastic e-mails from professors who have participated in my workshops and subsequently altered their methods. It is my hope that this essay will inspire you to do the same.

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About the Author

A Professor of Psychology at Dalton State College, Christy Price has been teaching at the collegiate level for seventeen years. Christy won the Excellence in Teaching Award at Dalton State in 2007, the University System of Georgia Teaching Excellence Award in the Two & Four-Year College sector for 2008/2009, and she was honored by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition as one of ten Outstanding First-Year Student Advocates for 2009. Christy's awards are, in part, a result of her use of innovative strategies in assisting students to achieve learning outcomes. Her dynamic and interactive style make Christy a favorite as a professor and presenter. She regularly presents as a keynote speaker and leads workshops at faculty development seminars and retreats. As a recipient of an institutional foundation grant award, Christy has studied teaching techniques that influence student motivation. Her most recent research focuses on engaging Millennial learners and preventing incivility in the classroom. Christy has completed Post-Doctoral work in Educational Psychology from Georgia State University. She holds a Doctorate in Community Health from the University of Tennessee, a Master's degree in Counseling Psychology from the University of Nebraska-Kearney, and a Bachelor's degree in Social Services from Northern Illinois University.

How Can I Create Effective Mini-Lectures – Checklist for Action Planning

	In Creating Mini-Lectures I try to:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral/ Mixed	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	Limit dissemination of information to 15-20 minutes per mini-lecture	SA	A	N/M	D	SD
	Action Planning: If you disagree, contemplate how you might break up course time differently such that mini-lectures are interspersed with application and processing time. For ideas on Student Engagement Techniques you might embed consult Barkley, E. (2011). Student Engagement Techniques					
2.	Minimize note-taking, heighten attention, and enhance memory processing by using Guided Practice.	SA	A	N/M	D	SD
	Action Planning: If you disagree, brainstorm on how you might create mini-lecture guides for students which guide their attention and learning by evoking questions to be answered throughout the mini-lecture.					
3.	Enhance memory processing with visuals and multimedia.	SA	A	N/M	D	SD
	Action Planning: If you disagree, work through your content and learning outcomes and attempt to find associated images and videos supporting each of your main points. Create slides / visuals with vivid associative images and minimal text. See Reynolds, G. (2012) Presentation Zen					
4.	Establish content and outcome relevance	SA	A	N/M	D	SD
	If you disagree, for each mini-lecture create a relevance statement that clearly communicates the significance of the content. Connect content to students' current academic lives and/or to their future professional lives. For additional ideas see Ambrose et. al (2010) How Learning Works					

5.	Exhibit enthusiasm	SA	A	N/M	D	SD
	If you disagree, how might you change the content in order to feel more energized by what you are sharing with students in your mini-lecture?					
6.	Create mystery	SA	A	N/M	D	SD
	If you disagree, think of questions, cases, and examples you might use to create an element of mystery. See Sousa (2011). How the Brain Learns for more information of how mystery enhances learning and memory processing.					
7.	Embed surprise	SA	A	N/M	D	SD
	If you disagree, think of cases, visuals, videos, and supporting stories you might use to embed surprise. See Heath & Heath (2008). Made to Stick for examples of how embed surprise in order to support memory of content.					
8.	Evoke positive emotion with humor	SA	A	N/M	D	SD
	If you disagree, think of visuals, videos, cartoons, and supporting stories you might use to embed humor. See Berk (2003). Professors are from Mars. Students are from Snickers for examples of how embed humor in order to evoke positive emotion.					
9.	Allow for interaction and processing time	SA	A	N/M	D	SD
	If you disagree, there are multiple resources you can utilize to find interdisciplinary ideas on how to stop, interact, and process content. Probably two of the most well know sources are Angelo T. and Cross, K.P. (2003) Classroom Assessment Techniques and Barkley, E., Cross, K.P., & Major, C.H. (2004). Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty					
10.	Create a positive emotional experience	SA	A	N/M	D	SD
	If you disagree, the most important question to ask is, "What are the things we might be doing to prevent students from having a positive experience?" According to my own research, Price (2010), modern learners are very demotivated by rigid course structure and power oriented or negative interactions with their professors. They desire more authoritative interactions as opposed to authoritarian power structure. For ideas see the article provided with these materials titled "Why Don't My Students Think I'm Groovy?"					

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