INTRODUCTION

Today's higher education classrooms are predominately filled with Millennials. But who are Millennials and what are their predominant attributes? A quick search of Wikipedia shows that Millennials, also known as Gen Yers, are generally the children of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. They are an ethically diverse generation “who are team players, optimistic, confident, trusting of authority, rule followers, achievers in school, and generally achievement oriented in everything they do” (Boston College Center for Work & Family, n.d.). Since the ability to work in groups is a fundamental component within classrooms of higher education and the professional environment, it would appear that Millennials would fall naturally into place with group work since they are accustomed to working in teams their whole lives. Millennials enjoy group work because it is perceived as more fun and gives them a sense of unity and collaboration; unfortunately, it also gives them a way to avoid risks (Alsop, 2008). So, how do characteristics and learning styles of Millennials affect group work? As educators generally stemming from the Baby Boomer and Gen X generations, many instructors are either unaware or misinformed on effective grouping strategies for Millennials. This paper explores the fundamental differences of Millennials and how they translate into strategies for successful group work.

ABSTRACT

The ability to work in groups is fundamental to education and professional environments. Today’s classrooms are predominately filled with Millennials who have been working in teams their whole lives. Millennials enjoy group work because it is perceived as more fun and gives them a sense of unity and collaboration; unfortunately, it also gives them a way to avoid risks (Alsop, 2008). So, how do characteristics and learning styles of Millennials affect group work? As educators generally stemming from the Baby Boomer and Gen X generations, many instructors are either unaware or misinformed on effective grouping strategies for Millennials. This paper explores the fundamentals differences of Millennials and how they translate into strategies for successful group work.
According to Howe and Strauss (2000), in their canonical Millennials Rising: The Next Generation, seven distinguishing traits define Millennials: Special, Sheltered, Confident, Team-oriented, Conventional, Pressured, and Achieving. To understand these traits, we must also understand how the traits were created. In general, Millennials are a product of the parents, educators, legislators, and general culture that collaborated to create a more child-centered society that spawned the no-child-left-behind era, where every child was valuable (Pattengale, n.d.). But we must look deeper into the traits of this generation to understand them fully.

Special

There is no doubt that the general culture, parents, and students believe that Millennials are unique, but the parents of this generation are defined by their children. Parents of Millennials waited until they achieved financial security to have children and then went to great pains with fertility treatments to conceive them (Pattengale, n.d.). Hence, Millennials were greatly anticipated by their parents. This focus of the Baby Boomer generation on their children created a strong sense of self-worth in Millennials that developed into an attitude of entitlement and a perceived unwillingness to work hard and pay their dues (The Futures Company, 2011).

Sheltered

Millennials are exposed to everything through popular media, which makes it tempting to think that they are tough, hard-wired individuals that can take on the world. In fact, we must remember that Millennials grew up in a sheltered life, defined by the 1990’s youth safety movement and a dense structure of new regulations that protected them (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). Spawned out of this structure came a plethora of helmets, pads, cars, and toys (“Baby on Board” signs), that led to a generation that was highly “buckled, watched, fussed over, and fenced in by wall-to-wall rules and chaperones” (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Although well meaning, the outcome of this sheltered lifestyle leans Millennials toward risk aversion (Pattengale, n.d.).

Confident

As a generation, Millennials are an upbeat and positive bunch that is often dubbed as the sunshine generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Surveys show that 72% are happy in general with life and 90% are happy and excited about what the future holds (Noveck & Thompson, 2007; Pattengale, n.d.). Millennials’ use of analytical skills for long-term decision-making has been used to explain the turn around of previously negative behaviors from previous generations (Pattendale, n.d.), but more recent events such as the financial crises and inter-locking economies have severely challenged confidence (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). Either way, this trait fills the halls of higher education with predominantly self-assured students.

Team-oriented

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, Millennials have a natural affinity for team orientation that developed from the likes of an unassuming purple dinosaur named Barney, high participation in team sports, use of school uniforms, and classroom emphasis on group work. (Howe & Strauss, 2000). They like teamwork, but prefer to collaborate and work in teams with their generational peers (Dolan & Stillman, 2002; Skiba, 2008; Nicholas & Lewis, 2008). They are smart and they know it, but they look for accomplishments both inside and outside the classroom. “Millennials may not place as much value on “work” as their supervisors have, but they may find themselves accommodating the demands of the workplace and behaving more like Baby Boomers once they become committed to particular projects and goals” (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

Conventional

Born into a divorce culture, Millennials are intensely aware of the fragile nature of family and hence feel that the idea of “Family” is key (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). They are a generation comfortable with rules and regulations because they have been surrounded by them throughout their life. They feel that the rules of their parents, teachers, and coaches make their life easier. They understand the value that reinforced and support their family values and think that someday they can apply them to “run the show” much better (Howe & Stone, 2000). Tim Clydesdale (2007) goes on to state that Millennial students in higher education differ from previous generations in their greater acceptance of diversity and ability. But others think that the embrace of Boomer parent values and team dynamics have not created a reversal of individualism but contemporary reification of it, a type of “hyper-individualism on steroids” (Howe & Strauss, 2007).

Achievement

As mentioned above, Millennials are planners. Howe and Strauss (2000) state that they have big plans, particularly about their careers. Where their Baby Boomer parents had interest in accomplishment in arts and humanities and were internally driven, Millennials are more rationalistic (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This means that while Millennials are willing to put work into projects, they do not expect to gain insight or personal transformation from school (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). Routine multitasking may have also shortened their attention spans and caused them to lack critical thinking skills (Murray, 2004; Nicholas & Lewis, 2008). Nonetheless, Millennials are intelligent. Their SAT scores are the highest since 1972 (Pattengale, n.d.). For them, multiple choice can be very easy, but they look for accomplishments both inside and outside the classroom. “Millennials may not place as much value on “work” as their supervisors have, but they may find themselves accommodating the demands of the workplace and behaving more like Baby Boomers once they become committed to particular projects and goals” (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

STRATEGIES

The complex set of fundamental traits outlined by Howe and Strauss (2007) stand as excellent points of departure for the creation of pedagogy in higher education that supports and mentors the needs of the Millennial generation. Many of the traits that Millennials have can be very positive, but they also hold a “shadow side” that must be addressed. For example, confidence should be nourished, but guarded against becoming arrogance (Howe & Strauss, 2007). So, what perspectives on organizational interventions that would allow for the successful pedagogy for group projects can abound? Strategies include: structure, leadership and guidance, measures, and engagement. The collaborative learning of group projects, actually works towards building the character trait of confidence within Millennials.
Group Projects with Millennials: The Question of Not Why…but How

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Millennials need to be taught how to handle personal interaction and conflict. For them, life is best understood in communal categories and messages that emphasize "not letting a friend down," which are more effective than messages directed toward self-interest (Partengale, n.d.). Also, help them democratize their group. Ask them to elect a group leader and structure the project with a business-like hierarchy, where group members report to group leader, and group leaders report to the boss.

Aladair Macintyre stated in his article entitled After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (1984) that in the world today "the language of the hierarchy, where group leader and structure the project with a business-like order" so much that we only have a "simulation of moral-ity." Given this societal problem, the issue of ethics must become a prominent feature of any class. Millennial characteristics of Special, Confident, and Achievement oriented are attributes "that can easily move towards excessive, self-absorption and even narcissism (Wilson & Gerber, 2008); Millennials also have a high regard for their groups and are more likely to turn this regard inward, creating a "tribal" focus that can devalue respect for set canon of behavior with regard to ethics (Hersch, 1999). When coupled with cultural relativism and egocentrism, that are the birthright of young students everywhere, such self-and group-esteem can powerfully separate our pupils from their consciences (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). Therefore, rigorous attention to the ethics of learning must be openly communicated.

The high Achievement characteristic of Millennials makes them extremely interested in their grades and work (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). Millennials are high importance of proper attribution of any borrowed content (Blackboard, 2011). Quizzes can also be created in Blackboard that allow students to test their knowledge on practice exams and verify understanding before taking an in-class exam in class (Blackboard, 2013). With regard to actual grading, instructors are faced with the difficult challenge of grading group work fairly. In their article entitled, Assessing Group Work, James et al. (2002) provided two suggestions for grading group work fairly. They suggest providing two grades: one grade for the overall group and one grade for each individual in the group. The need for an individual grade is vital to Millennials because of their Achievement characteristic. They look for ways to "pull ahead of the crowd." Besides that fact, "work-products of the group are largely individual (and) each member has strong individual accountability to his or her task" (Katzenbach, 2002). The individual grade component helps avoid the logistical problems of the "free-riders" phenomenon and non-contributing group members. Further support for providing individual grades and how they can produce personal accountability among students was shown in the Carnegie Mellon University article. There is also the issue of student overestimation of the quality of the work done. Too often, the Millennial Achievement characteristic impels them to overestimate the value of their efforts and appeal for top grades (Wilson & Gerber, 2008) (Kendall & Moody, 2011).

Engagement

Millennials are more focused on meaningful work (Boston College Center for Work and Family, n.d.) their learning and communication style is through multi-media. The common method of contact is text messaging and instant messaging, as well as cell phones. Try to stimulate the passion that the process of learning that grew up with the internet is a challenge. Millennials are said to be experiential, engaging, and interactive (Nicolas, 2008). They "want to work quickly and creatively, and they want to do it their way" (Zemke, Raines, & Filipezak, 2008). Millennials have grown up with vast choices in their lives and education. They think that it is their birthright to have them. Wilson and Gerber (2008) suggest that it is a good idea that Millennials "input into the design of their projects, grading systems or rubrics, and teamwork activities" (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). Palloff and Pratt (2001) states that there should set guidelines for the class overall, but allow some flexibility and room for negotiation. Wilson and Gerber (2008) go on to advocate for the tradition of student-centered learning. All of the above information addresses multiple fundamental characteristics of Millennials such as Special, Confident, and Achievement.

CONCLUSION

The ability to work in groups is a fundamental component to any educational or professional environment (Coffin, Bob Campbell, & Bjorklund, 2000); however, this statement is especially applicable to earlier generations teaching students of today. Millennials are more adept at managing in a changing, global, and networked environment. They will do it with great emphasis on teamwork, facility with use of technology, and sensitivity for needs of balance in life and work (Heskett, 2007). Millennials are high maintenance, high risk, and often high output individuals (Heskett, 2007), but the most crucial point of understanding the characteristics of the Millennial generation is often lost in more complex cultural and societal dynamics (Howe & Strauss, 2007). “That point is simply, our students are not entirely like us…. What is generally true for others our own age, is not necessarily true of the generation of students that now make up our undergraduate population” (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Instructors must understand what makes their students “tick,” in order to create efficient and effective group projects in the classrooms of higher education.

REFERENCES


