

## **Engaging the Adult Learner Generational Mix**

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### **Abstract**

Educators and Trainers both focus on adult learning theory when teaching. In the workforce, as well as in higher education, current literature pertaining to adult learners tends to lump all adults into the same category. Scant research exists that reviews the adult learner through a generational lens. This paper examines the elements that engage and disengage adult learners in multiple classroom settings through a generational perspective. The authors suggest implications for adult education professional practices based on understanding as a teacher/trainer that generational characteristics influence expectations of how materials will be taught.

### **Introduction**

How adults learn, preferences of adult learners, and characteristics of adult learners are fields of study packed with research and literature. In fact, workforce development, training programs, and human resource development professionals all educate individuals—adult learners. However, the literature does not address the fact that the characteristics that are applied to “all adults” are in reality a mix of distinct generations of adult learners with different histories, preferences, and values. This lack of acknowledgement is concerning for any trainer or educator who teaches an “adult” audience, which may include a mix of generations and, within the mix, a variety of adult learning characteristics.

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In order to establish healthy training and educational programs which contribute to the well being of organizations, the learning styles, values, and preferences of each generation must be considered. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of three different generations of learners and to compare the elements that engage adult learners through a generation lens.

Our data collection included approximately 60 students from two graduate-level courses who were asked to fill out surveys several times throughout the semester. Brookfield's (1995) Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) was adapted to fit the design of the courses, and the learners self identified their generation. The results were analyzed through both the andragogical model (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005) as well as through a generational lens.

### **Literature Review**

Malcolm Knowles (1977), an adult educator, developed the paradigm of Andragogy and is attributed with popularizing and operationalizing the concept, which is defined as the "art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, p. 61). The practice of Andragogy, unlike pedagogy, puts the focus on the learner—the adult— and not on the teacher. Andragogy tends to emphasize the process of teaching over the content that is being taught.

Knowles originally identified four critical andragogical assumptions which were later expanded to six in the andragogical model put forth by Knowles, Holton, & Swanson (2005). The model is part of a learning theory system and includes six assumptions about adults: (1) the need to know; (2) the learners' self-concept; (3) the role of the learners' experiences; (4) readiness to learn; (5) orientation to learning; and (6) motivation.

Brookfield (1995), an adult education scholar, designed the CIQ which invites student reflections, perspectives, and insights on what constitutes their learning. The CIQ explores pedagogical, environmental, and relational sources of engagement, disengagement, excitement, and anxiety. The CIQ sustains Brookfield's idea of "critical conversation" among students so that they may increase their awareness of choices that foster and impede democratic processes in the classroom (p. 111). The CIQ used in this study served as a source of faculty insight into student

learning preferences through self reporting data asked on the questionnaire.

## **Generation Definitions**

Three distinct generations of adults co-exist in the workforce and higher education today, Baby Boomers, born between 1943 and 1960; Generation-X, born between 1960 and 1980; and the most recent generation, Millennials, born between 1981 – 2002 (Goldman & Schmalz, 2006). Each of these generations brings with it a special set of characteristics that tend to influence learning preferences. While the adult learning literature is clear about learner characteristics, little is known about the subtleties of learning preferences of adults in each of these three generations.

Generational characteristics can best be defined by what influenced each generation during their developmental years. Historical events, cultural norms, and political environment all shape each generation's common values, beliefs, and characteristics. According to the FBI National Executive Institute (2007):

Baby Boomers saw the cultural change while raised in “traditional” homes where the number of moms entering the workforce was starting to increase, the Vietnam War was ongoing, and electronics and technology were beginning to grow.

Generation X were the “latchkey kids” at the end of a school day, with more working moms, the explosion of technology, higher divorce rates, drug abuse, political scandals and the Cold War. They saw a negative society and had to rely on themselves more often. Their cultural experiences are credited for giving them their greater sense of independence, questioning of authority and wanting to find a balance between family and work.

Although they are largely the children of late era Baby Boomers, Millennials benefited from parents who gave greater focus on family. They have seen an explosion of technology from the time they could use a keyboard and computer, technology has been all around them ranging from electronic

games, Internet access, emails, to instant messaging and cell phones. (p. 12)

### **Methods**

Student feedback was solicited through surveys from two graduate student classes in the same program. The two courses were comprised of on-line and hybrid instructional formats in three different locations. The survey was adapted from Brookfield's (1995) CIQ and queried students about their experiences in the course: when they were most and least engaged, what may have puzzled or surprised them, affirming or puzzling actions, and of which generation they were a part. For purposes of this particular analysis, we examined the responses given by the adult learners when they were most and least engaged.

Students in the hybrid class were asked to complete a survey each time they met face-to-face, approximately three times throughout the semester. Adult learners enrolled in only the on-line courses were asked to complete the survey at the end of each unit, generally every three to four weeks. A total of 60 students were enrolled in the combined two classes. Adult learners could not be identified or linked in any way to the responses that they gave. Approximately 50% of the students enrolled identified as Generation-X, and 30% being Baby Boomers, and 20% as Millennials.

### **Analysis**

Our analysis focuses on three of the six assumptions in the andragogical model (1996) which are briefly explained, then further separated into generations. This paper will cover Readiness to Learn, Orientation to Learning, and Motivation to Learn through the generational lens.

#### **Readiness to Learn**

Adult learners seek answers to resolve a specific need to know. Changes in developmental tasks or life changes are sometimes responsible for creating a need to know. When adults become ready to learn something, as Knowles explained, "they experience a need to learn

it in order to cope more satisfyingly with real-life tasks or problems” (1980, p. 44).

In general, instead of coming to a course seeking specific answers, adult learners usually come with a readiness to learn. The adult students in these courses may have been ready to learn the general content; in addition, they indicated being ready to learn the specifics based on connections the authors made with them as they progressed through the assigned readings.

**Millennial.** Millennial adult learners’ responses seemed to lack a curiosity or demonstrate a specific need to know. Many of their responses indicated not being ready; one commented, “I felt as though I never had a chance to just sit down and do it. I kept going back and then having to re-engage in the questions.” Another linked personal lack of readiness to other life forces, “I was struggling to stay on top of my homework while traveling for my job....anxiety that was generated from discussions in my office.”

**Generation-X.** Little was needed to convince or prepare the Generation-Xers to learn; with the slightest nudge, their responses indicated that they “were ready.” The nudge, however, seemed to stem from personal connections with both the classmates as well as the professor. Standard comments like, “discovering that new learning can replace (old) beliefs, values, and other mindsets was fascinating” were a norm. They looked for connections with classmates, materials, and past experiences, and focused on how the teachings related to them. “Seeing how everyone rated and the different comparisons that could be drawn from responses, really helped me” was one learner’s observation.

**Baby Boomers.** The Baby Boomers (Boomers) indicated a readiness to learn when the material contributed to personal growth and gratification and were delivered in a traditional format. A common reaction from this population was, “I suppose I can say that it was coming across in a more (applied) form. There was much practical information and I made a lot of notes, more than I did in the first half of the text.”

The Boomer’s lack of readiness was attributed to work-life balance and lack of understanding material that was unfamiliar to them. For example, “I don’t think it had a lot to do with Vella’s reading; it was mostly my personal schedule.”

## Orientation to Learning

Another characteristic of adult learners is their orientation to learning. Adults are life-, mission-, or problem-centered in their route to learning. They want to see how new knowledge can be applied to their life or what it could look like through an understanding or new knowledge lens, whether it is to improve job performance, come up with creative ideas in the workplace, or handle family situations. Connections can be made to show how information is presented to the adult learner. Flexibility in course requirements can help encourage an adult learner to find ways of applying knowledge to a personalized situation. When other adults share real life applications of content, it invites classmates to think of how the same knowledge could be applied in their situations.

**Millennial.** In all three generations in our study, the desire to understand the materials and how they applied the new knowledge to real life was a contributing factor to the adult learners' motivation to learn. "I was being assessed in my teaching perspectives. This section fascinated me because I felt I could relate." When the Millennial adult learners could not relate new readings to their own experiences, they easily became disconnected as this Millennial indicated, "Discussing chapters I couldn't relate to [made me feel distant]" and they lacked orientation to stay engaged.

**Generation-X.** Like most of our findings throughout the survey, Generation-X made personal connections with the new materials, class discussions, and instructor in order to orient their learning. "I think I felt the most engaged as I began to make a connection between the philosophies I read about and my own teaching and learning experiences. I especially appreciated Pratt and felt that I was really learning about myself." Their self reliance and personal focus also contributed to their orientation to learning. A common Generation Xer remark was, "I felt the most engaged during these weeks of Vella when I had the opportunity to *identify in my own life* where I've seen the principles in action. It's one thing to read about it; it's another when you actually realize that they make real sense."

The Generation-X learners reported feeling least engaged due to lack of orientation; they could not relate the materials in any part of their lives as this learner indicates, "Sometimes I had trouble conceptualizing how

to apply the material when working with adults with little or no formal education.”

**Baby Boomers.** When Boomers were oriented to learning the new materials, their answers were well thought out as well as lengthy. For this group, orientation stems from the joy of discovery and self gratification. A common theme from the Boomers was, “I felt the most engaged when I was reading ...I was amazed to find out there were different ‘philosophies’ if you will, for teaching. This *opened my mind* quite a lot and gave me a *new perspective* on teachers, and their methods. I always just did it naturally when I taught and it worked. I never realized there was a method to my madness which was predominately the ‘nurturing’ perspective.”

### **Motivation to Learn**

While motivation to learn may sometimes be external for adults, it is more often associated as being internal for adult learners. Internal motivation may include improving an individual’s self-esteem, helping an individual gain self-confidence or a sense of accomplishment, garner recognition, or quite possibly lead to a better quality of life.

In his book, *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn*, Wlodkowski (2008) identifies four elements of culturally responsive teaching: (a) establishing inclusion; (b) developing attitude; (c) enhancing meaning; and (d) engendering competence. Establishing inclusion involves making the learners feel respected and connected to one another so that they know they are a part of and key contributors to their environment. Developing attitude is concerned with creating a favorable disposition that will increase the likelihood that the adult learner will choose to learn and find relevance in the topic in order to make it applicable to individual life situations. Developing attitude is also making sure that certain values and people are not treated with privileges. Enhancing meaning is about challenging and engaging adult learners through learning experiences to help them connect the meaning to a larger social arena in which they have associated values. Engendering competence engages the learner so that he or she values the learning in a way that establishes competence in applying the knowledge.

**Millennial.** The responses from the Millennia generation indicated that very little about the class motivated them to learn. Their responses

seem to leave the motivating in the hands of the instructor, their classmates, or the authors—but motivating factors did not seem to stem from within. Most of the lack of motivation seemed to be due to a failure of enhancing meaning. A repeated comment went something like this, “I felt like that book was saying a lot of the same things over and over again, so I had a hard time staying intrigued.”

While Millennials looked to their classmates for enhanced meaning, they seemed to find triteness instead, as this adult learner portrays: “We log on, ask our questions, answer them, and then there are several posts saying, good point and then are followed up with examples or other information brought in to the discussions that I feel are designed as more self promoting than beneficial to the group.”

**Generation-X.** Inclusion seemed to be the motivational driver for Generation-X. After taking an assessment on teaching style, one adult learner remarked, “I found a lot of my classmates had the same [results]. It was interesting to read their discussion and how they came about their teaching styles, etc.” The same adult learner went on to say, “I thought after the authenticity section that the reading would become more so-so [and] not as exciting or motivational, but it has and it has been partly because I have a group that discusses and it makes [the content] interesting.” Feeling comfortable enough in the culture that groups had established, Generation-Xers pointed out that being engaged because of various group’s online discussions, we are “able to express positive and negative viewpoints.”

Generation-Xers pointed out what didn’t motivate them as well; their comments indicated a lack of connection or the ability of an author or classmates to enhance meaning. “It really didn’t move me like our authenticity text has,” yet another confessed not being engaged because, “I did not like the way [the author] presents her ideas, that her way is the only right way to do things.” This generation seemed to yearn for contact, feeling distant “before logging into our group discussions as there is no interaction with class members and I look forward to the online segment of the course to gain some of that interaction.” They wanted all to be included and were turned off when, “discussions got dominated by a few people.”

**Baby Boomers.** While boomers seemed to comment more on negative motivating factors, they did seem to connect when they were allowed to show competence. One Boomer remarked being engaged

“when I was answering questions that were posted in response to my discussion starter.” When they felt as if they were not allowed to show competence, this generation seemed unmotivated and disconnection, reflecting, “distanced when I had no responses to my discussion starter.” Another expressed disappointment when he struggled to interpret the meaning of an analysis without pictorial support, “That was too bad because I really feel I could have gained some good insight from the visual presentation of my data.”

### **Implications**

While it is important for adult education professionals to keep characteristics of their population in mind, we focused our research one step further—to three of the generations that make up the majority of the workforce. Our analysis showed that teachers and trainers of adult learners need to be aware of generational characteristics when developing lesson plans and training materials. Combining generational understanding with current adult learner theory provides a unique teaching as well as learning experience. Through this analysis, we have come up with several implications for teachers and trainers of adults.

**Readiness to Learn.** Use individual activities and find out how each activity could influence receptiveness to the topic. All three generations reported being the most engaged with new materials when they could make *connections*. For Generation-X, it was personal connections, Millennial connected to hands-on experiences, and Baby Boomer connected more readily when deep life understanding could be made. Activities to encourage readiness should be delivered with multiple techniques, keeping in mind the influences of generational characteristics.

**Orientation to Learning.** Each generation shares a need for immediate application of theory to practice. As a teacher or trainer using the generational lens, materials should be delivered *focusing on problems* as opposed to just context. Another recommendation would be asking, “How does this material affect current life activities?” If on-line instruction is being used, how does a group assignment affect the learner’s *orientation to real life obligations*?

In order for adult learners to make a connection with the materials being presented, information should be as *individualized and*

*personalized* as much as possible. Letting the adult learner do assignments that pertain to their real life situation provides a natural orientation to learn new theories for each generation.

**Motivation to Learn.** Whether materials are being delivered on-line or in-person, the teacher/trainer needs to *discover factors* that motivate each individual. Our recommendation is to create small group discussions, then a large discussion. Starting at the small group level trust can more easily be established before engaging the entire group in open discussion.

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