Listening to the voices of today's undergraduates: Implications for teaching and learning

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Abstract: The landscape of higher education has changed with the presence of a new generation of college students. Current studies do not carry the voices of the new generation known as the Millennials. This article presents the findings of a qualitative study that explored the learning experiences of Millennial-generation undergraduates at a public comprehensive university. The researchers organized a series of focus groups designed primarily to determine how the undergraduates characterize their learning experiences. Five thematic categories of data emerged from the study, providing insights into students' perceptions and motivations. The implications of the findings for teaching and learning are highlighted.

Keywords: active learning, focus groups, integrative learning, involvement theory, Millennial generation, student engagement

Beneath the broad umbrella of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is a growing body of publications reflecting varied methodological techniques. The techniques include quantitative assessments of student learning (e.g., Bernardes & Hanna, 2009; Breedlove, Burkett, & Winfield, 2007); case studies of what works in course development (Dole & Bloom, 2009); and reflective essays about the connection between SoTL and actual practice (Bowen, 2010; Willox & Lackeyram, 2009). Despite the breadth and quality of existing SoTL work, surprisingly little is known about how students themselves characterize their learning experiences. The few studies that have prominently carried the "voices" of college students date back to the 1980s and therefore do not incorporate the insights of an entirely new generation – the "Millennials." If teaching is to become more learner-centered and collaborative, as a new paradigm requires (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Weimer, 2002), then it is particularly important to take into account what students themselves have to say.

I. Literature Review.

The literature we review in this section focuses on the Millennials and on current pedagogical approaches or strategies employed in today's institutions of higher education. The strategies we have identified in the literature are categorized as *active and integrative learning*.

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A. Millennial Generation.

Higher-education administrators and faculty now face a dramatically changed demographic landscape. Labeled *Millennials*, the generation born after 1982 is described in stark contrast to previous youth generations – Generation X (born 1961-1981) and the Baby Boomers (born 1943-1960) Howe & Strauss, 2000). According to Howe and Strauss (2000, 2003), the new generational cohort displays positive social habits, such as a focus on teamwork, achievement, civic-spiritedness, and good conduct. Unlike their predecessors, Millennials are not self-absorbed, distrustful pessimists and rule-breakers. Rather, they are optimistic, high-achieving rule-followers, who rely on structure in their daily lives (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 2003; see also DeBard, 2004).

Although Howe and Strauss (2003) made several generalized claims about changing expectations and learning styles of this new generation, they did not discuss how (or even whether) these expectations should be accommodated. They seemingly have left that matter to experts engaged in SoTL. If the general characterization of Millennials is to be believed, this new generation is undoubtedly defying conventional wisdom regarding youth. Still, educators have to be mindful of the danger of stereotyping students, ignoring individual differences, and treating them in a manner designed to reinforce behavior that is part of normative generational expectations. It is important that educators understand how generational characteristics influence the expectations and motivations of their students. Such an understanding can sensitize them to the needs of their students and facilitate the teaching-learning process in today's classrooms.

B. Active and Integrative Learning.

Under the broad heading of SoTL, a number of important studies have examined the educational experiences of undergraduates in recent years (e.g., Gardner, 2006; Pintrich, 2004). These studies reflect a larger movement in higher education that emphasizes new and different teaching methodologies, such as the use of multiple instructional technologies, a refocus on active and integrative learning (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002; Huber, 2007), and increased opportunities for experiential learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000).

Active learning is generally defined as any instructional method that engages students in the learning process. It calls for students to do meaningful learning tasks and to think about what they are doing (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Prince, 2004). Active learning implies student participation and engagement in the learning process. It is often contrasted to the traditional lecture, where students passively receive information from the course instructor. In addition, active learning is often tied to high-impact, community-based educational practices such as service learning, undergraduate research, and internships (Kuh, 2008), which involve out-of-classroom projects. In active learning, students engage in higher-order cognitive activities, such as the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information. While we note the importance of fostering active learning, we are aware that several obstacles are associated with it. Obstacles include limited class time, a possible increase in preparation time, the potential difficulty of using active learning in large classes, and a lack of the necessary material, equipment, or resources (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Additional drawbacks include the risk that students will not participate and the possibility that they will not use higher-order thinking or learn sufficient content.

Much work still needed to be done regarding integrative learning. As Derek Bok (2006) argues, despite some positive gains, the structure of the modern university does not allow students to see connections across disciplines or between curricular and co-curricular activities. Still, there is enduring interest in integrative learning, which is typically demonstrated through the application of knowledge and skills to new settings and complex problems (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007). Active-learning practices facilitate the "enriching educational experiences" associated with student engagement (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2000, p. 4). Further, student engagement is manifested in the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. Engagement is demonstrated also in how institutions organize the curriculum and other opportunities for student learning, and in the deployment of resources as well.

It stands to reason that students learn more when they are engaged, or involved intensely, in their education, and when they think about and apply what they learn in different settings. For faculty, the challenge is to implement strategies that foster the much-touted integrative learning. Clearly, implementing such strategies requires thoughtful planning and the creative use of resources.

II. Research Purpose and Theoretical Perspective.

Prompted by the recent generational shift and the adoption of new approaches to pedagogy, we decided to conduct a qualitative study through which we would elicit the views and voices of Millennial-generation students. We were interested particularly in hearing from undergraduates about how they viewed their learning experiences. Our formative research plan was complemented by a theoretical perspective that encompassed the concepts of *active learning* (Bonwell & Eison, 1991), as defined above, and *student involvement* (Astin, 1984).

Astin's theory of student involvement posits that the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program. Astin defines *involvement* as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297). The involvement theory is concerned with the behavioral mechanisms or processes that facilitate student development. The theory highlights student-faculty interaction and suggests that frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement. Of course the "academic experience" to which Astin refers is not limited to activities and outcomes in the classroom but also to those occurring outside the classroom walls (Kuh, 2008; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2000). We were therefore interested in determining how Millennial-generation students characterize their learning experiences, both inside and outside the classroom.

III. Method.

Our research project took place at a mid-sized, public comprehensive university in the Southeast. We used a qualitative, exploratory design, employing the focus group method. A focus group is a small-group, moderated discussion that follows a predetermined protocol; discussion is used to elicit insights and understandings that simple questionnaire items may not be able to do. Whereas one-on-one interviews may reveal an individual's thinking about a specific topic, the interaction of focus group participants, as they share their perspectives, opinions, and experiences, provides

researchers with a broader view than that obtained through individual interviews (Morgan, 1998). Focus groups are well suited for producing information on college students' attitudes and experiences about particular programs, services, or relevant issues (Jacobi, 1991; Kaase & Harshbarger, 1993).

A. *Participants and Procedure.*

We organized a series of six focus groups and purposively recruited Millennial-generation undergraduates (n = 33; 19 female, 14 male; ages 19-24) with varied levels of campus involvement so as to capture diverse perspectives based on a range of student experiences. In terms of campus involvement, the sample included at least one Greek-letter organization president, two board members of student clubs, one philanthropic service project coordinator, and three students who indicated that they had not yet become involved in campus activities. Each group was composed of three to eight members, male and female, including students from all undergraduate classes (Table 1). Among focus group members were students on "learning contract" – that is, students who had earned less than a 2.0 GPA during their first semester at the university – and students who were enrolled in the summer Academic Success Program. Some group members were recruited randomly at the University Center.

Table 1. Focus group composition.

Focus Group Population	Sample (n = 33)	Gender		Class			
		M	F	F	S	J	Sr
Honors College	7	2	5	1	3	2	1
Student-athletes	5	2	3	1	4		
Learning Contract	3	2	1		1	1	1
Academic Success Program	5	3	2	1	1	2	1
Greek-letter Organizations	8	3	5	1	5	2	
Random	5	2	3		1	1	3

F = freshman, S = sophomore, J = junior, Sr = senior

The university's Institutional Review Board approved this research project, and each of the participating students signed a consent form, signifying their willingness to participate in the project, and their understanding of the confidential nature of the data. In an attempt to control for the influence of the moderator, the same moderator was assigned to all focus group sessions. The moderator asked open-ended, semi-structured questions that served as prompts for the discussion. Four sets of questions were included in the protocol (Table 2). Throughout the focus group sessions, the moderator stimulated discussion among the participants by asking probing, follow-up questions. Such "probes" also served to expand and clarify participant responses. The moderator recorded her observations after each session.

Table 2. Focus group prompts (questions).

1 Think about all the things that you have learned since coming to [the university]. What has been the most valuable or important thing you have learned? How did you learn it? How did you contribute to that learning experience?

2 Tell me about a time when a class meeting went very well. What was that like? How did you contribute to that learning experience? Tell me about a time when a class meeting did not go very well. What was that like?

3 Tell me about an especially good assignment that you've had while at [the university]. How did you contribute to that learning experience? Tell me about an especially bad assignment.

4 Tell me about an especially good learning experience you have had outside the classroom while at [the university]. How did learning occur? How did you contribute to that learning experience?

The open-ended nature of the questions allowed the participants to contribute to shaping the discussion (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Moreover, the focus groups were conducted in an environment that was conducive to conversation and non-threatening to the respondents. Such an interactive environment prompted participants' self-disclosure and the sharing of ideas, experiences, and attitudes about the topic (Krueger & Casey, 2000). With the participants' permission, the conversations were recorded on audiotape. Each focus group session lasted approximately 60 minutes. The tapes were subsequently transcribed verbatim by a transcription service agency and coded for analysis by the researchers.

B. Data Analysis.

Using an inductive approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we coded the data by identifying categories suggested by key words and phrases from the transcripts. We conducted the first round of coding individually and the second round as a team, discussing the categories, noting points of agreement and disagreement, and eventually reaching a consensus about the coding categories. The theoretical perspective that guided the study helped us interpret the categories. Together we identified recurring themes and patterns across the six focus groups. We did not disaggregate the data by group, because our aim was not to compare the experiences and perspectives of one group with another.

The focus group moderator did not participate in analyzing the data but, instead, provided clarification of some respondent comments, or at least the context of the comments. A member of the university's Qualitative Research Group (QRG) who was not involved in the analysis served as an auditor. The QRG member reviewed the data, the coding scheme, and the themes for clarity and consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and eventually confirmed the trustworthiness of the findings.

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IV. Findings.

In this section, we present the main findings derived largely from focus group participants' responses. First, we summarize learning experiences that were significant for students; then we examine the themes generated by the qualitative analysis.

A. Significant Learning Experiences.

Responding to questions posed by the moderator of the focus group sessions, students shared collegiate experiences that were significant to them. Some students described classroom experiences while others focused on co-curricular activities; some dwelled on their interactions with faculty; others discussed their community-based learning experiences. "Valuable" or "important" things learned at this university were related as much to personal attributes and life skills as they were to academic content and civic involvement.

For example, a student-athlete said she "learned a lot about [the consequences of] procrastination, and my grades have gotten a lot better because I don't do that very much anymore." A sophomore talked about his favorite classes "with teachers that fully understand the subject they're talking about and are passionate about that subject." For her part, a fraternity member learned how to "take responsibility for yourself"; and, likewise, a freshman learned to "set priorities and become more responsible." Also, a senior learned "how to better handle the reality of life … and how to be independent"; and in the words of another upper-division student, "the biggest thing I've learned since I've been at college is to appreciate people's differences."

In one of the sessions, a focus group member stated that he learned "how to interact with people not only on campus but [also] in the community." Similarly, what was significant for another member was "becoming involved in the community that we're in, because … the more you put in, the more you're going to get out of it."

Students reported that they liked projects that had explicit parameters and clear criteria for grading, a notable departure from their Gen-X predecessors. However, they also wanted faculty to assign projects that "allow us to have guided choices," rather than projects based on strictly imposed topics. By and large, students did not like group work as part of their courses, because most group members tend to not pull their weight, a finding which contradicts many of the social learning aspects often ascribed to this generation. In general, students had negative reactions to faculty members who showed a "lack of passion for teaching" and "don't seem to care." Significant learning experiences, in sum, depended on all those involved, from the individual student to other students in the classroom, community members, and faculty.

B. Themes.

Five thematic categories of data emerged through the coding process: (1) *Involvement in co-curricular activities*, (2) *Preference for experiential learning*, (3) *Seeking support from peers*, (4) *Valuing faculty-student interaction*, and (5) *Learning and taking responsibility*. We will consider each in turn.

Involvement in co-curricular activities. Focus group participants discussed their involvement in student organizations (registered clubs and fraternities/sororities) and events (e.g. community service and fundraising projects). Greek (fraternity and sorority) life was "apparently a powerful experience" for some students, according to the focus group moderator. In this

regard, a respondent noted: "One thing I've learned is realizing that the community you're a part of – for me, I guess it'd be Greek life at [the university] – has given me so much that I … feel obligated to give something back." Giving back meant taking part in philanthropic activities and recruiting fraternity members.

Focus group participants specified the "positive experiences" provided by learning communities (which are typically groups of students taking two or more classes together). One student observed:

> When I first came in, I was with one of the living-learning communities here on campus, the Freshman Leadership Institute. … That [has] motivated us to go out and become leaders, become involved on campus; and I would say that that living-learning community probably was one of the biggest steps in becoming involved.

Co-curricular activities also helped students to become better socialized. Two focus group members reflected on their co-curricular involvement:

> I went with an alternative spring break group to provide hurricane relief after Katrina … and it was amazing. I didn't know people [in the group]; we all went for different reasons. Some people were required to go for community service hours; some people went because their friends were going; others went because volunteering was the good, Christian thing to do … and I met a lot of cool people.

> I've definitely learned that you have to open up; meet new people. My two best friends right now I would never have hung out with in high school. So, [my advice is to] just open up and meet new people; experience the experience that college is.

Preference for experiential learning. Students expressed a strong preference for "hands-on experience" and project-based experiential learning. Emphasizing that they would rather "do activities [than] just sit in class," students explained that they "get so much more out of a class if there's a discussion and if it's hands-on." Such was the case for students who were required to conduct interviews for a short documentary.

Role-playing was popular with students. In that regard, a business student shared this information:

> We did management scenarios, which was completely different from anything we had done in there before, and it was really hands-on. We got involved. [Our professor] wrote out skits for us to participate in. It was … really great because we could all relate to what we were pretending to be, in some way or another. And it was just really cool, because it was just a completely different approach than just sitting in there for an hour or whatever, listening to somebody else talk about something that may go over your head.

In the same vein, another student recalled:

> I played a role in one of the scenarios, and I think what made it so great for me was the fact that it was a role that's completely opposite of my personality. So, I really had to step out of my box or my comfort zone to do something to get a point of view that was different than my own.

Some respondents said they valued the experience that came from peer-to-peer tutoring and discussion. One of them described a course in which she and her classmates voluntarily tutored one another, explaining the course material and clarifying the subject matter. Students taking a food sanitation course went into the community to practice conducting food inspections. As a respondent observed, such a "real-world" experience showed the professor's creativity and was "a big draw for us as students."

For a student learning TV production, "going off campus to film was an opportunity to understand what goes on in the business." And for a theatre student, "meaningful" experience resulted from a service-learning project that engaged her class in producing a play and assisting public-school pupils learning English as a Second Language. "It was awesome," the theatre student said of the experience. "You can't get a better project than that."

Seeking support from peers. Focus group members underscored the importance of peer support to both personal development and academic success. The Academic Success Program was cited as facilitating peer-mentor support, which, in the view of one student, was "probably the best part about coming to [the university]."

Regarding support from peers, other students commented:

I need people around me to help me kind of push myself, and I do the same for them. Like if I have to get something done, somebody is going to say something to me, or if they have to get something done, I'm going to say something to them and make sure that they do it.

I would say [what's important is] networking and having relationships with other people, and not just learning course material, because aside from the schoolwork, having relationships with [fellow students] and teachers has actually made me grow and develop and learn more as a person than necessarily the classes that I took.

[It's important to] surround yourself with people that you know will make you successful. … You are away from your family … and it's [necessary] to find a group of people here that will support you and hold you accountable for what you want to do. … You've got self-motivation … but it's nice to know that you have some kind of support coming from other students.

While Gen-X students showed strong preference for self-reliance, these millennial students seemed to appreciate the importance of peers both socially and academically.

Valuing faculty-student interaction. Focus group members said they welcomed opportunities to meet with their professors after class, whether in the classroom, in the professor's office, or elsewhere on campus. However, it was the informal, outside-the-classroom interaction that made many students truly admire their professors. One student said:

I've actually been able to make pretty good friends with some of my professors. … I'm a transfer student, and one of the things I'm able to do at this school is I could talk to any professor like equals or comrades … and it is really cool. I didn't think [that] at a state school you would be able to do that kind of thing. I thought they would be more aloof –more like, oh, you're just a number in the classroom, but … it's not necessarily the case.

Another student, who said she once enjoyed regular conversations with a faculty member, reported: "I could always talk to her, even [though] she isn't my advisor. … I just like having a

teacher that's always caring for you." A third student declared that she "responded better to professors who interacted with me outside of class." Their responses suggest that these students perceive learning as taking both inside and outside of the classroom.

Learning and taking responsibility. Students participating in the focus group sessions indicated that their experiences on campus and in the wider community engendered a sense of responsibility. They discussed the importance of time management, independence, taking responsibility for their own learning, and learning from mistakes. With regard to time management, students talked about the challenges involved and the necessity to "resist the party temptation." One student, who initially first spent as much time in the ball park as he did in the classroom, admitted:

> I ended up failing a lot of my classes my first semester. So, after I realized what I'm doing wrong [in terms of] the whole time management thing, I decided to organize scheduling. It helps out a whole lot.

Regarding independence, several students described moving from being "taken care of" while in high school to being on their own as college students. Acknowledging the difficulty of learning to be responsible, a freshman confessed:

> I thought I knew how to handle reality, and how to be independent, and how to be on my own. [Becoming responsible] was probably the biggest lesson that I learned; it's probably been the hardest one I had to learn in the time I've been here.

The theme of *learning and taking responsibility* is illustrated also by these comments from four students:

> I've learned a lot … not just through [formal] education. … I had to get my own apartment; I had to feed my own self [because] mom wasn't there to feed me; and just little things like that.

> I've learned a lot more responsibility. … You just have to do it and be motivated when you get into the real world, as opposed to high school.

> I've had some ups and downs at [the university] and had to leave. ... [Now I am] learning that it's my responsibility to take initiative; it's my responsibility to get to class and make the grades. … The common goal is to get out of here with a degree and move on and be productive in the world; so I just feel like it has taught me a lot more responsibility in how to do things myself.

> I made some pretty big mistakes. I fell on my face a couple of times, but I believe they were necessary lessons that I had to learn. I had to learn how to … be a more mature adult.

Respondents described their learning experiences variously. For some students, the experiences were "difficult" or "challenging"; for others, the experiences were "interesting" or "great." A few students pointed to the "awesome" experiences that they had when they engaged actively in course projects.

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V. Discussion.

This study has found that undergraduates enjoyed involvement in co-curricular activities, including community service, preferred to be immersed in active-learning situations, sought support from fellow students, valued interaction with faculty members outside the classroom, and learned the importance of taking responsible action. Although students in this study regularly sought peer support, they did not like course-based group work. This particular finding is viewed in contrast to the team-oriented characteristic of Millennials described in the literature (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 2003). We also did not find evidence in our sample of Millennials that they necessarily exhibited optimism or the "can-do" attitude that Howe and Strauss attributed to this generation. However, the focus group members' interest in community service corroborates the civic-mindedness that characterizes Millennials.

Moreover, focus group members' keen interest in co-curricular and active-learning opportunities is consistent with Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement. The findings also confirm that community-based work has a positive impact on students (Kuh, 2008). However, students' obvious inability to synthesize their collegiate experiences into profound statements about learning was noticeable in the focus group responses. Respondents gave little indication of coherent critical thinking about the connections between their academic and co-curricular activities. It may very well be that the university structure still does not allow students to see connections between curricular and co-curricular activities, as Bok (2006) pointed out. Faculty nonetheless can facilitate the kind of reflective activities that help students integrate learning from different experiences and settings.

Although the focus group data allowed for considerable depth of analysis, we caution against generalizing the findings. After all, the findings are based on the experiences and viewpoints of a particular set of undergraduates – a small, non-representative sample – at one institution. More research is needed to determine how generational characteristics influence the expectations and motivations of college students. Nevertheless, while we acknowledge that the data analyzed in this study were derived from the subjective perceptions of students, we believe the findings have much to offer. They are significant to higher-education administrators and faculty because they provide useful insights into undergraduates' perceptions and motivations, and into how Millennials make meaning of their experiences. Such insights can positively influence approaches to teaching and learning.

The attendant challenges for faculty and student development professionals are both exciting and daunting. They are exciting because today's undergraduates want to be engaged and active. Few would doubt that this creates a more interesting and rewarding work environment for higher-education professionals. The challenges also are quite daunting because undergraduates now seem to look more critically at educational strategies and classroom practices that affect them.

The findings of this study have implications for teaching and learning. If colleges and universities are to become more learner-centered (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Weimer, 2002), then the curriculum should be designed in a way that will foster student engagement in the learning process, both inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, students should be supported in applying knowledge and skills intentionally in various settings, including local communities. Providing such support requires collaboration across the institution's divisional lines, involving student development professionals, academic administrators, and faculty members.

What, then, are the implications for teaching and learning?

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1. Curricula should include clear, interrelated goals for courses, academic programs, and student learning
2. Pedagogical practices should promote opportunities for meaningful collaboration between students and with other stakeholders such as faculty, staff, and community members
3. Providing and creating knowledge should be complemented by opportunities for students to apply that knowledge
4. The teaching process should encourage students to relate academic material to their lives outside the classroom through critical reflection
5. The teaching process also should engage students in higher-order thinking tasks that will prepare them for workplace and societal challenges

VI. Conclusion.

Our research reflects how members of a new generational cohort think about their experiences as college students. Today's Millennial-generation undergraduates do not want to be passive repositories of knowledge but active participants in shaping their own learning experiences. They desire practical experiences that allow them to use their knowledge and practice their skills effectively.

Different generations of students undoubtedly will bring different perspectives to higher education. Educators should listen to the voices of their students and consider the distinctive attitudes and worldviews that their students convey. Further, educators should be prepared to establish institutional and pedagogical practices that are responsive to their students' needs and interests. By doing so, they can help students realize their full potential.

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