

# The Multi-Generational Classroom

## Who Are Our Students?

When most of us think of an adult education classroom, the “traditional” student comes to mind. However, what is a “traditional” student? In today’s educational environment, there really is no such thing as a “typical” adult education student.

In today’s classroom, you will encounter students from many different generations. According to Strauss and Howe (1997)—pioneers in the field of generational studies—a generation shares a time and space in history, leading to similar life experiences and a collective personality.

There are at least four generations in both the modern American workforce and our adult education classrooms:

- Traditionalists (1927-1944)
- Baby Boomers (1945–1964)
- Generation X (1965–1982)
- Millennials (1982-mid 2000)

Each generation has certain characteristics inherent in most members of the cohort. Although there are differences, the following table provides you with an at-a-glance view of each generation.

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*“Each generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it”*

*George Orwell*

	Traditionalists (1927-1945)	Baby Boomers (1945–1964)	Generation X (1965–1982)	Millennials (1982-mid 2000)
<b>Profile</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard work</li> <li>• Loyal employee</li> <li>• Sacrifices for the company</li> <li>• Thrifty</li> <li>• Conforms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workaholic</li> <li>• Optimistic</li> <li>• Crusades causes</li> <li>• Success = materialism</li> <li>• Works efficiently</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work-life balance</li> <li>• Independent</li> <li>• Lives for today</li> <li>• Distrusts companies</li> <li>• Bends rules if needed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What's next?</li> <li>• On my terms</li> <li>• Civic minded</li> <li>• Earns to spend</li> <li>• Questions the status quo</li> </ul>
<b>Defining Events</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1937 Hindenburg tragedy</li> <li>• 1937 Disney's first animated feature (Snow White)</li> <li>• 1941 Hitler invades Russia</li> <li>• 1941 Pearl Harbor; U.S. enters World War II</li> <li>• 1945 World War II ends in Europe and Japan</li> <li>• 1947 Jackie Robinson joins major league baseball</li> <li>• 1950 Korean War begins</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1954 First transistor radio</li> <li>• 1962 John Glenn circles the earth</li> <li>• 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. leads march on Washington</li> <li>• 1963 President Kennedy assassinated</li> <li>• 1965 U.S. sends troops to Vietnam</li> <li>• 1966 Cultural Revolution in China begins</li> <li>• 1967 World's first heart transplant</li> <li>• 1969 U.S. moon landing</li> <li>• 1969 Woodstock</li> <li>• 1970 Women's liberation demonstrations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1973 Global energy crisis</li> <li>• 1976 Tandy and Apple market PCs</li> <li>• 1979 Margaret Thatcher becomes first female British Prime Minister</li> <li>• 1980 John Lennon killed</li> <li>• 1981 AIDS identified</li> <li>• 1986 Chernobyl disaster</li> <li>• 1986 Challenger disaster</li> <li>• 1987 Stock market plummets</li> <li>• 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill</li> <li>• 1989 Berlin Wall falls</li> <li>• 1989 Tiananmen Square uprisings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1993 Apartheid ends</li> <li>• 1995 Bombing of Federal building in Oklahoma City</li> <li>• 1997 Princess Diana dies</li> <li>• 1998 Clinton impeachment</li> <li>• 1999 Columbine High School shootings</li> <li>• 2001 World Trade Center attacks</li> <li>• 2002 Enron, WorldCom and corporate scandal</li> <li>• 2003 War begins in Iraq</li> <li>• 2004 Tsunami in the Asian Ocean</li> <li>• 2005 Hurricane Katrina</li> </ul>
<b>Technology of the Era</b>	Radio	Television	Personal computer	The Internet
<b>Approach to Learning</b>	Tell Me What to Do	Show Me What to Do	Why Do I Need to Learn This?	Connect Me to What I Need

Engaging with multigenerational students requires that you find ways to bridge “generational gaps” that may be present. While one cannot generalize, members of the Traditionalist and Baby Boomer generations may be skeptical of new information and technology, yet seek education that applies directly to their professional or vocational needs. While they may be proficient in technology, they may also require reassurance that they will succeed in new educational endeavors.

Generation Xers and the Millennials, on the other hand, are future-oriented and highly proficient in social networking and technology. They take education more for granted and are confident about professional success but may accept information uncritically as fact.

Because generational differences can impact learning, it is important that you determine “who” is in your classroom. One strategy to working with a multigenerational classroom is to use the **MEET** approach (VisionPoint, 2006):

- **M:** Make time to discuss
- **E:** Explore differences
- **E:** Encourage respect
- **T:** Take responsibility

When used in the classroom, **MEET** can assist you and your students in minimizing generational conflict and strengthening collaboration among all students – an important skill in postsecondary education and the workplace.

Remember, good teaching practices are good teaching practices regardless of the generation being taught. However, there are some strategies and techniques that work better for learners of certain ages based on generational differences.

The following chart provides some basic preferences/styles and the types of instructional activities that work best with the different generations in your classroom.

## Classroom Implications for Different Generations

Generation	Preferences/Styles	Instructional Activities
<b>Traditionalists</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Like the “traditional” classroom structure</li> <li>• Will not generally contradict or disagree with instructor in front of others</li> <li>• Does not enjoy being singled out in group discussions or for questions</li> <li>• Likes to practice alone, not in groups</li> <li>• Not likely to ask questions during discussions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organize materials in bullet/outline form</li> <li>• Don’t provide too much information</li> <li>• Use at least 12 point type</li> <li>• Take your time through the important points</li> <li>• Don’t assume that all are technophobic give computer/research assignments</li> <li>• Fastest growing segment of population learning to use the Internet</li> <li>• Encourage periodic movement during class time</li> </ul>
<b>Boomers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enjoy working in creative manner</li> <li>• Sensitive to criticism</li> <li>• Often possess significant professional experiences</li> <li>• Require significant interaction and “talk” time</li> <li>• Enjoy icebreaker and introduction activities</li> <li>• Prefer a spirit of collegiality in classroom</li> <li>• May have problems with authoritarian instructors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give plenty of time for Boomers to practice new skills alone</li> <li>• Use at least 12 point type for aging boomers</li> <li>• Have a tendency to “know” things but not be able to do them</li> <li>• Do not generally like role-play exercises</li> <li>• Enjoy most team projects</li> <li>• Can serve as group leaders, appealing to their “me” focus</li> <li>• Organize materials with headings/put details on a separate sheet</li> </ul>
<b>Gen Xer</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-reliant</li> <li>• Require regular, if not constant, feedback</li> <li>• May lack interpersonal skills</li> <li>• Can be cynical</li> <li>• Require relevance in assignments and courses</li> <li>• Often impatient</li> <li>• Consider themselves technologically capable</li> <li>• Are adaptable and informal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School/life balance is important</li> <li>• Will resist group work outside of class</li> <li>• Use pop-culture examples if possible</li> <li>• Give lots of individual attention</li> <li>• Use most exciting material in short lecture (15-20 min)</li> <li>• Use small groups to cover other material</li> <li>• Use bullet points when giving information</li> <li>• Use plenty of graphics and white space/visual appeal is key</li> <li>• Explain why assignments, courses, skills are important on a regular basis</li> </ul>

<b>Millennials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accustomed to group work</li> <li>• Comfortable with active learning</li> <li>• Multi-task with ease</li> <li>• Technological experts</li> <li>• Goal and achievement oriented</li> <li>• Require more structure and mentoring</li> <li>• Learn from failure</li> <li>• Motivated by money and earning potential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give lots of activities with several steps</li> <li>• Use the most up-to-date technology and references available</li> <li>• Get creative or allow them to be creative with presentations, etc.</li> <li>• Give reading materials for lectures or supplemental information</li> </ul>
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## Who Are the Millennials?

Because they are the newest generation to enter our adult education programs, it is important to better understand who the Millennials are. The millennial generation is the generation of children born between 1982 and 2002. A generation larger than those of us who are Baby Boomers, the Millennials have different characteristics than any generation before them.

Millennials are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in U. S. history. One in four grew up in a single-parent household. They saw new examples of family and the workplace.

Students in your program who are Gen Xers grew up in the era of Sesame Street, whereas Millennials were raised with interactive education television. They have the expectation that education will also be entertaining.

Millennials have been highly protected and sheltered. They are also extremely team-oriented while also being pressured to succeed. Millennials have grown up in the world of high-stakes testing. Confident, they expect to advance rapidly in the workplace and to be successful in everything they do. A Millennial will support his/her case with you of why a grade or assignment is not appropriate. Due to their diversity, Millennials are accepting of lifestyle, racial, and ethnic differences.

In the classroom, Millennials expect technological processes that provide convenient, any-time, anyplace, replies to their questions. They grew up “googling.” To learn more, review the following chart on the core traits of Millennials and how the way in which they were raised impacts your adult education classroom.

## Overview of the Millennials

	Core Traits	Educational Implications	Teaching Strategies
<b>Special and Sheltered</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political and social focus on children</li> <li>Children are seen and heard</li> <li>Columbine, campus shootings, abductions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helicopter parents</li> <li>No Child Left Behind = progress carefully and regularly monitored, problems dealt with promptly or preemptively</li> <li>Entitlement, comfortable asking for special treatment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop relationships with students using internet communication such as Blackboard and email</li> <li>Develop social interactions and interpersonal skills</li> <li>Provide immediate feedback and reinforcement</li> <li>Clarify expectations up front, provide structure, set ground rules</li> <li>Use smaller projects and assignments rather than one-time sink-or-swim exams</li> </ul>
<b>Confident</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-esteem movement</li> <li>Grown up feeling loved</li> <li>Possibilities of fame and success enhanced with reality shows, My Space, YouTube, but higher rates of depression and anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficulty accepting criticism</li> <li>Unrealistic expectations about college and professional work</li> <li>Personal individuality, lack of need for the approval of others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicate that they are better achievers</li> <li>Recognize that they are multi-taskers</li> <li>Provide specific feedback</li> <li>Develop mentoring activities</li> <li>Develop clear expectations, clear grading policies, stick to them</li> <li>“Dignify errors,” give positive feedback with criticism</li> </ul>
<b>Pressured</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High expectations</li> <li>Increased competition for grades, schools, jobs</li> <li>Highly scheduled, structured childhoods</li> <li>Increased demands for time</li> <li>More depression and anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bottom-line learners</li> <li>“More knowledgeable but less creative”</li> <li>External reward focus can lead to cheating/plagiarism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand that they are stressed and avoid overloading with a number of projects</li> <li>Avoid long lectures</li> <li>Use breaks and experiential learning</li> <li>Realize that they have short attention spans</li> <li>Define and support academic integrity</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Adulthood shock”</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show meaning of content and learning</li> <li>• Provide smaller and more frequent vs. high-stakes assignments</li> <li>• Keep in touch with students about grades/assignments</li> </ul>
<b>Achieving</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Believe that it’s cool to be smart</li> <li>• Internships rather than summer jobs</li> <li>• Double majors, concurrent degrees</li> <li>• Appealing an “A-”</li> <li>• Planning for the future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anxious about grades</li> <li>• External validation</li> <li>• Demand for high academic standards</li> <li>• Conformity results in “teaching to the test”</li> <li>• Increased competition means fewer rewards for creativity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use software and other digital devices</li> <li>• Use straight-forward objectives and grading system</li> <li>• Realize that they learn experientially and need feedback</li> <li>• Use latest trends and media information</li> <li>• Provide real-world application</li> <li>• Reward creativity</li> </ul>
<b>Techno- logically Savvy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immersed in technology</li> <li>• Informed about the world around them</li> <li>• Multi-taskers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students in 8 “places” at once</li> <li>• Shorter attention spans</li> <li>• Low tolerance for older technologies</li> <li>• Information gathering skills rather than analytical skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use technology</li> <li>• Give students information with multi-tasking in mind</li> <li>• Control the use of technology, don’t be afraid to say no</li> <li>• Teach students to use technology wisely</li> </ul>
<b>Team- Oriented</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technological networking</li> <li>• Project-based nature of work &amp; school</li> <li>• Groups with a mixture of genders/ethnicities /races is common</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tolerance of differences</li> <li>• Lack of tolerance for disengaged teaching</li> <li>• Struggles with critical peer review</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognize that students are more diverse and that they seek interaction with different cultures</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for cooperative learning, group projects</li> <li>• Develop group projects in a way that ensures individual accountability</li> <li>• Integrate community-engaged teaching, real-life projects in the curriculum</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start with focused projects/assignments and gradually move towards more open-ended work</li> </ul>
<b>Anti-autocratic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informality of life/work</li> <li>• The Bill Gates success story (casual, young, no name, college dropout)</li> <li>• Community-generated knowledge (workplace projects, Wikipedia)</li> <li>• Lack of respect for central authority</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less need for others' approval</li> <li>• Less respect for authority</li> <li>• Blurred lines about who owns knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish ground rules of discussion, role of instructor, behavior</li> <li>• Get students involved in class structure</li> <li>• Make students accountable to each other, peer grading</li> <li>• Treat students as "junior colleagues"</li> <li>• Give students ample opportunities to contribute</li> <li>• Treat them with respect</li> </ul>

## Implications for the Classroom

The era in which you grew up has helped to shape your expectations for the classroom. The key thing to remember is that learning preferences don't necessarily change with age. Millennials who are comfortable with multi-tasking and multi-media will always be comfortable with these things and are not likely to change. Traditionalist learners will always be more comfortable with lectures and with the instructor in a traditional teaching style, rather than a more participatory style that appeals to Millennials and Boomers. Generation X learners will always prefer individual work to group work and will generally complain the loudest when given a 20 chapter book to read. Conversely, members of the Millennial generation are readers, as evidenced by the increase in the publication of children's books (i.e., Harry Potter).

### What Will Work For You?

There are some tips that will work for everyone. The following are strategies that will work for all students, regardless of the generation into which they were born.

- Ask for professional experiences from both Boomers and Xers
  - Boomers will often want to talk about their professional experience
  - You may need to encourage Xers to share, but the tendency of Xers to change jobs more frequently than past generations should give the older Xers a solid base from which to explain their experiences
- Change activities often
  - Research currently shows the attention span of a typical adult to be 15-20 minutes at best



- Rotating group and individual activities works well
- You can often take an individual activity (a question and answer sheet or reflection activity) into a small group or paired activity for more interaction among class members
- Tap into the technological strengths and interests of Xers and Millennials
  - Will often drag Boomers into the technology realm with them
  - Don't assume all Boomers or Traditionalists are technophobic
  - Don't assume all Xers and Millennials are technologically savvy
- Assign group roles for the first few team projects
  - Be sure to assign the Millennial student(s) a leadership role periodically to help develop their ability to make decisions for themselves
  - Be careful not to let the Gen X student check out of the group project by assigning that student an active role in the project
- Work to foster a team environment
  - Consider the use of formal groups with clearly defined roles that are rotated throughout the group
- Enforce individual accountability for group projects
  - Collaborative learning only works well when students feel both personally accountable as well as accountable within their group
- Require participation in some form each class period
  - This helps the less vocal generations (Traditionalists, Xers at times) understand that what they have to say is valued and important for others to hear
- Find the right mix of guidance, structure, and visibility for all groups
  - Some groups or individual students will find you hovering while others will appreciate the assistance
  - Try not to offer opinions unless asked by the group and ask the group to agree on when to bring in outside help
- Encourage discussion between the groups
  - Consider using an activity that will open up the discussion about differences between generations and in the classroom in general
- Recognize excellent performers individually
  - This is particularly important for each generation in their own way
  - Comments on papers and/or a note in front of the class can be very effective for boosting the self-esteem of all learners
- Give individual work in addition to group work
  - Appeals to the individual nature of Xers and the Traditionalists
  - Allows Boomers to be in charge of their own show

## What Will Work Against You?

Teaching is hard work. It's important to also understand what does not work well. The following are a few hints on things that are less effective in the multigenerational classroom.

- Trying to appeal to all generations in the same assignment
  - Things you do will appeal to learners of different ages, with different learning styles at different times. Include a variety of activities so that all learners have the opportunity to participate in activities that appeal to them.
- Clashes will often come between Boomers & Xers and again between Xers & Millennials
  - Boomers tend to regard Millennials as children and will often give them more latitude
  - Don't let the potential for clashes prevent you from assigning students of different generations to work together in teams. Teamwork is a skill our students need to focus on continually
- Not allowing enough time for groups to become comfortable with one another before beginning a project
  - All groups require some kind of "norming" process before they can really be effective as a group, so allow the groups some time for introductions and small talk before beginning the activity
  - If you use longer-term groups, you will want to extend activities to include a formal icebreaker and/or biography exercise to ensure that students have enough time to develop relationships
- Not allowing students with experience to bring that into the classroom
  - Build enough discussion time into your classroom to allow for students to speak as this not only validates their generational need but also helps you set the andragogy context that tends to be effective in adult learning environments
- Ignoring generational differences completely
  - Pretending that there are no differences in students because of their age is like pretending that all students learn the same way.
  - Don't go overboard in trying to design your class to appeal to every generation. Good teaching is good teaching. However, make sure to design your GED® program with a variety of activities.
- Not asking students to stretch beyond their comfort zones
  - Learning is an uncomfortable process and when you ask students to do something they aren't familiar with, you are helping facilitate that process of growth
  - Growth requires assistance, so be careful about throwing students into situations for which they are completely unprepared<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Beattie, Sheri. Teaching Across Generations. Baker College. Retrieved from the World Wide Web at: <https://www.baker.edu/departments/etl/trainingresources.cf>