

Generational Diversity Teaching and Learning Approaches

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Nursing students represent multiple generations—Baby Boomers, Generation X, and now the Millennials. Each generation has its own set of values, ideas, ethics, beliefs, and learning styles. The authors describe the context, characteristics, and learning styles of each generation and provide suggestions for enhanced teaching and learning across multiple generations. Using generational diversity as a teaching tool in the classroom is also discussed.

When one thinks about diversity in a classroom of nursing students, the first thing that comes to mind is racial diversity, or perhaps having few men in the group. An area of diversity that is rarely considered is age as demonstrated in the different generations represented in our nursing students. The nursing classroom today is composed of millennial students (born after 1982), who represent the typical student attending college immediately after high school; Generation Xers (born between 1961 and 1981), who are the “nontraditional students” returning to college, perhaps after beginning or raising a family; and possibly Baby Boomers (born between 1943 and 1960) pursuing a second career or entering the workforce after raising a family.¹ The faculty member most likely represents Generation X or Baby Boomer age categories. A few faculty members may even be of the silent generation, those born between 1925 and 1942.

Generational diversity of faculty and students presents important teaching and learning considerations because it refers to more than just age differences. The literature on generations¹ tells us that each generation has its own set of values, ideas, ethics, and culture. Understanding these generational differences can help faculty use various teaching strategies to better meet the learning needs of their students. In addition, faculty must examine their own biases and understandings of different generations so as to best facilitate learning in all students.

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Generational Descriptions and Learning Characteristics

Strauss and Howe¹⁻³ determined that each generation has a “peer personality” because individuals share an “age location in history” that lends itself to a collective mind-set. Because generations hold a common place in history (ie, they have parents from the same generation, they experienced the same national catastrophes and successes, they have grown up with the same music, movie stars, etc), they have a way of viewing the world that is different than the generations before and after.⁴ Members of each generation may not all agree with these general views; however, they all have had to deal with them.

Understanding generational characteristics gives nurse educators insight into how students from different generations learn best. For example, because of generational differences, when you pass out a syllabus on the first day of the class, the Baby Boomer student will immediately go the page that depicts how the grade will be determined because boomers are preoccupied with grades; the Gen Xer will go to page that lists all of the assignments and tests because they want to know what they have to do to pass the course; and the millennial student will go to the course outcomes and teaching methods section because

they are hungry for information that is presented in an entertaining way. These 3 different ways of thinking are the result of the generational experiences that individuals share because of growing up in a common location in history. Table 1 describes the context in which the 4 generations grew up and some of their defining characteristics.^{1-3,5}

Silent Generation (Born 1925-1942)

While it is unlikely that any nursing students are in the silent generation, it is very possible that some faculty are. Silents have been described as unimaginative, unadventurous, cautious, and withdrawn—thus the name “Silents.”¹ This generation is “adaptive” as they were willing to conform to beliefs of their parents and accept and adapt easily, rather than rebel. Members of the silent generation prefer to work in large organizations that offer job security.

A faculty member of this generation may be loyal, but may be thinking about early retirement. Silents may have more difficulty adjusting to technological advances in nursing and education. This faculty member may have difficulty understanding Generation X and the Millennials, given the sizeable gap in generational thinking.

Table 1. Generational Descriptions

Generation	Context	Generational Characteristics
<p>Silent (1925-1942) Type: Adaptive Famous Silents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Martin Luther King • Sandra Day O'Connor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents were immigrants • World view shaped by WWII and the Korean War • Events: Penicillin eradicated many infections, the polio vaccine was invented; lived through the Great Depression and subsequent New Deal • Heroes: Rosie the Riveter, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Frank Sinatra • Popular songs: Why Must I Be a Teenager in Love? Rock Around the Clock 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value hard work and thriftiness • Emphasize traditional mores • Hold work values of conformity, consistency, and uniformity • Work at large corporations that offer longevity and security • Value the system over individual enterprise
<p>Baby Boomers (1943-1960) Type: Idealist Famous Boomers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • George W. Bush • Hilary R. Clinton • Oprah Winfrey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents had secure jobs and had optimism about the future • World view was shaped by the Vietnam War • Events: Sex, drugs, rock'n'roll are prevalent; civil rights movement; Watergate; birth control emerged • Heroes: Neil Armstrong, John F. Kennedy, Betty Friedan • Popular songs: American Pie, Let It Be 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have the buy now, pay later mentality • Rebellious and questioned the status quo • Moved away from extended families • Identify with their jobs • Equate work with self-worth • Are driven and dedicated • Believe they can change the world • Believe they do not have to grow old and sedentary
<p>Generation X (1961-1981) Type: Reactive Famous GenXers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Michael Jordan • Tom Cruise • Mike Tyson 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents were not family-centered, most worked (thus GenXers were latchkey kids), and many were divorced • World view was shaped by Iran hostage situation, Gulf War, Tiananmen Square killings, and the fall of the Berlin Wall • Events: Oppression in South Africa, Challenger space shuttle exploded; Hip-hop and rap born; Roe v. Wade passed; emergence of AIDS; first computer disk was sold • Heroes: Magic Johnson, Lee Iacocca • Popular Songs: What's Love Got to Do With It? Beat It 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are ironic, cynical, adept, clever, resourceful • Define themselves in opposition to their parents • Do not belong to any group • Know how to win • Manage on their own and participate in discussions • Are comfortable with technology • Balance job and leisure time • Adapt well to change • Tolerant of alternative lifestyles • Become anxious when faced with the many decisions of adulthood • Believe that early adulthood is the time where they must determine the meaning in their lives • Try to attain several goals all at once
<p>Millennials (1982-2002) Type: Civic Famous Millennials</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zac Hanson • Tara Lipinski 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents wanted them; emphasized safety, rules, and discipline; wanted Millennials to be smart, powerful, and dutiful; Millennials were the "baby on board" and "have you hugged your kid today" generation • World view: War in Kosovo; 9/11; and terrorism • Events: Columbine; Oklahoma City bombing; Princess Diana's death; OJ Simpson trial; Rodney King riots; Lewinsky scandal; Jessica McClure, "everybody's baby" rescued • Heroes: Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, General Colin Powell • Popular songs: Titanic; God Must Have Spent a Little More Time With You 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are optimistic, assertive, positive, and friendly; believe they will be rich • Accept authority; are rule followers • Are accustomed to structure • Are cooperative team players, gravitating toward group activities • Are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation • Think of themselves as global • Have difficulty focusing on one thing; prefer to multitask • Have difficulty honing skills of critical analysis necessary to read between the lines due to volume of available information

Baby Boomers (Born 1943-1960)

Baby Boomers are likened to a "pig in a python" because they are a large population moving through history.⁶ Boomers

found their parents' world in need of revisions, that is, justifying, purifying, and sanctifying society. The major problems facing baby boomers today include getting children through college, caring for

grandchildren or aging parents, investing time and money in health maintenance, and retirement.

The Baby Boomer student has a great work ethic, comes prepared for

class, and arrives on time. This is either a second career move for them, or even possibly the first opportunity they could afford to attend college after putting their own children through school. Thus, they possess great motivation to succeed now that they are able to pursue this career goal. Not growing up with computers, some may struggle with the technological advancements; however, they are conscientious and willing to accept help. Most would probably prefer to learn content through an organized lecture and note taking, rather than a self-taught learning module on the Web or a CD-ROM. They are very concerned with grades, and usually want to know exactly what they need to do to make a certain grade.

Generation X (Born 1961-1981)

Generation Xers struggle to exert their presence in history, sandwiched between the Baby Boomers who are trying to keep their youth and just will not go away (think about Mick Jagger) and the Millennials who are lauded to be the next great generation.^{1,2} The Xers grew up during the time when divorce was at an all-time high, and a traditional sense of family was lacking. There was a different atmosphere for them growing up, perhaps exemplified by television. Boomers grew up watching Mickey Mouse Club and Ed Sullivan, while the Xers grew up with *The Simpsons* and *All in the Family*. Focusing more on entrepreneurship, Generation Xers want to learn useable skills and have a job that will promote their financial security, while still being able to enjoy their leisure time in whatever way they choose.

The learning characteristics of the Generation X student are probably best illustrated in a book by Peter Sacks, *Generation X Goes to College*.⁷ Sacks was a journalist who moved his journalism career from the newspaper to academia. In his book, he tells the story of the journey he had obtaining tenure at his university, and how he had to modify his teaching methods to ensure excellent student teaching evaluations from Generation Xers.

When Sacks encouraged students to think for themselves, gave them critical thinking exercises, and upheld professional and practical classroom

rules and expectations, he received extremely low teaching ratings from his students. To improve his teaching ratings, which was a necessity to be awarded tenure, Sacks changed his teaching methods, and told students what would be on the tests, gave short easy assignments, and allowed students to come late to class and turn in assignments late. With these changed teaching methods, his student ratings soared, and he was awarded tenure.

This story exemplifies the themes prevalent in the Generation X student. Generation Xers want things presented in a straightforward manner and want to learn the information in the easiest and quickest way possible. To the Generation Xer, time is a precious commodity, and leisure time is as important as time spent on academics. Allowing leisure time to take priority over schoolwork sometimes seems reasonable to them. They do not want to spend time “learning something they don’t need” just for the sake of learning. They want points attached to their assignments or they won’t do them, or won’t do them well. Gen Xers view education as something that has to be endured; it is merely a means to an end (job with financial stability).

Millennials (Born 1982-2002)

The Millennials, also known as the “net generation,” is lauded as America’s Next Great Generation, and are those who graduated from high school in 2000 and thereafter. Millennials are now the traditional students sitting in our nursing classes. They are positive, assertive, civic, moral, and defining individuals. Millennials were the “babies on board” and were raised by parents who embraced safety, family, and doing the right thing. Teen pregnancy, crime, drug, and alcohol usage has dramatically decreased in this generation. This generation grew up with computers, the Internet, and a world of information at their fingertips.^{3,8}

Millennials learn much differently than the GenXers and the Boomers. Because they are computer savvy, they would prefer to get a nursing article off the Web, rather than finding it on a shelf in the library. In addition, they demand immediate feedback on their work, as they are accustomed to

information access 24/7. Because this generation has been raised doing things in teams, they prefer group projects, and may even have difficulty with individualized thinking.^{3,8}

Acknowledging Bias

The first implication for nurse educators related to generational diversity is for educators to educate themselves about generational characteristics and acknowledge biases they have about each generation, including their own. Each generational student and faculty brings his or her own characteristics to the educational setting because of past common experiences. For example, Baby Boomer or Silent faculty members may see themselves as expert nurses, who are more knowledgeable than the millennial student sitting in the classroom; they are *the* authority figure. This expertise comes from years of experience in nursing and in life, and also from a belief that elders deserve respect and acknowledgment for their life accomplishments.

However, when it comes to computer skills and information literacy, there is a “generation lap”—that is, the millennial generation outpaces former generations on the technology track.⁸ Millennials know more about technology and computers than the generations that came before them; they are *the* authority on technology. Boomer faculty members need to acknowledge this technological expertise of the millennial students in their classroom, and encourage them to use it to advance their nursing knowledge.

Faculty have to view generational characteristics and beliefs not as right or wrong, but as different. As with religious or cultural differences, generational differences can be acknowledged. Being aware of our “generational prejudices and biases” and consciously moving beyond them will assist greatly as we develop learning opportunities that cross the generations of students in our classrooms.

Addressing Learning Needs of All Generations

A second implication for nurse educators relates to addressing the learning

styles of all generations sitting before them. Table 2 lists the learning style and characteristics of each generation. Classroom activities must be structured to meet the needs of the 19-year-old millennial, the 30-year-old GenXer, and the 50-year-old Baby Boomer. It should be noted that the little research in the nursing literature about generational diversity in nursing is mostly directed toward the nurse administrator managing staff from different generations.^{6,9,10} While planning and implementing different classroom learning strategies to address diverse generational learning needs takes more time and effort, the payoff is great. Students learn more when the teaching method is consistent with their learning styles, yet gain additional insight when occasionally pushed beyond their comfort level with alternative teaching methods.

While a baby boomer student may prefer the “broadcast” lecture-

type, teacher-centered methods of instruction, the millennial student wants to be entertained, as they have all their life with interactive computer learning games and devices. Both groups can benefit from teaching styles that compliment as well as contrast their learning styles. While we know students learn best when they interact with the course material, they need the faculty member’s guidance and clarification, particularly with difficult subject matter.¹¹

A Generational Approach to Content

Recognizing needed differences in teaching and learning in the curriculum, faculty can adjust their teaching methods to meet the learning needs of multigenerational students. While Table 2 gives some concrete examples of how classroom activities can be matched to generational learning

styles, the following example provides a demonstration of how one disorder can be taught using a variety of teaching methods that address several generational learning styles and preferences.

Pregnancy-induced hypertension (PIH) is a complex, multisystem disorder that results in over 20 physical symptoms manifested by the client. To teach this content to the Baby Boomers in the classroom, the instructor first lectures. The disorder is explained and supported by an accompanying handout. Content is provided slowly with time allowed for questions. For the Generation X student in the classroom, the instructor places on reserve in the library a video about PIH, or perhaps a CD-ROM self-instructional program—because this student may be surfing the net during the class, absent, or not extremely concerned at this point in time about PIH. Gen-X students,

Table 2. Generational Learning Styles and Activities*

Generation	Learning Style/Preferences/Characteristics	Examples of Generation-appropriate Learning Activities
Baby Boomers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact with faculty • Lecture • Learn best when their wealth of personal experience can be tied to the subject matter • Want to learn in a caring environment • Enjoy positive reinforcement for their efforts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lecture • Detailed handouts • Note-taking • Write a personal story related to content
Generation X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn quickly and efficiently • Only want to learn what will benefit them directly • Do better when they learn on their terms • Enjoy flexible learning times • See class assignments as something necessary to obtain their degree but it is different from work that is necessary to get the job they desire 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distance learning courses • Programmed instruction done independently, at their own pace, on their own time • Detailed study guides and test reviews that focus on what they will be tested
Millenials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoy working in groups; teamwork • Use technology whenever possible • Experiential activities • There is zero tolerance for delays • Strengths are multitasking, goal orientation, positive attitudes, collaborative style • Learn immediately from their mistakes (as they did when playing a Nintendo game) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simulations with immediate effect on how the student did • Group activities; solving a problem or answering questions to a case study in a small group • Creative, innovative interactive exercises, eg, have each student personify a birth control method by saying 3 things that this method would say to describe itself; have the students bring in some inanimate object that is consistent with the method’s qualities • A Jeopardy-style game, played with teams for a test review

*Silents are not included in this table, as it is unlikely that this generation is represented in a class of nursing students today.

however, at some point in the future will want to learn this content for their exam and will independently seek resources available when it does not interfere with their leisure activities.

For the Millennial student, the instructor plans an interactive exercise. Each student in the class receives a 5 × 7 index card with an etiology, body system, or symptom written on it. The instructor draws the concept map brackets of PIH on the chalkboard (this concept map is in every maternity nursing textbook). The goal of the exercise is for students to tape their index card on the correct bracket, depicting the pathophysiology of PIH. The cards are color-coded, for example, neurological symptoms in blue, renal symptoms in red, and so forth, to give the students a hint of how to proceed.

My experience with this activity is that the Baby Boomers first want to “talk about the process” of how to do this exercise before placing any cards on the board. Generation X students want to get the exercise done as soon as possible—because perhaps if they work quickly they will get out of class early. Finally, the Millennials want to discuss a variety of solutions to the exercise (ie, where to place the cards) so as to get the brackets correctly filled in without any error on the first try.

Using Diversity to Frame Content

Generational diversity can be used as a teaching tool to increase the richness and understanding of nursing content in the classroom. Often, older students in the classroom can provide a historical perspective on “how something was done when they were younger.” Presenting a health problem to students in the classroom from 3 different generations provides impetus for discussing how different generations might react to the illness. Students present differing approaches to how they would handle the health problem or how they would want to be treated by the nurse, which leads students to share insights that can be applied to patient

care with multiple groups of patients across generations.

Likewise, presenting a work issue and discussing how each generation would handle the issue will provide new information that students had not previously considered. For example, Baby Boomer students will want to meet and discuss the work issue in depth before making any decisions; the GenXers would not worry about chain of command, instead going right to the top administrator with their concern; and the Millennials would provide an abundance of up-to-date research on the issue to support their stand.⁹

Using information and views provided by the generations of students in the classroom provides faculty with a plethora of examples for application of content. Allowing students to take ownership of content by relating it to their own generation and what is important to them is a powerful teaching tool for faculty.

Conclusion

Understanding generational diversity allows nurse educators to maximize student learning because it promotes the educators’ and students’ valuing each other’s personal histories, characteristics, and learning needs. Hagevik wrote: “The beliefs you accumulated as a kid affect how you view risk and challenge, authority, technology, relationships, and economics, as well as whom you hire, fire, or promote.”^{12(p39)} While she is referring to managerial practices, her comments relate well to teaching across the generations. When personal and societal influences of childhood are acknowledged, both student and teacher will possess greater understanding of how they and others perceive the world around them. Embracing such knowledge provides nurse educators with a wealth of information and potential strategies that can be used in the classroom. The challenge for educators is to balance the generational learning styles of all students with good pedagogy. For example, even though Baby Boomers prefer to learn through lecture, we know that students learn best through active participation with the content. While interactive

strategies may be inconsistent with some generational learning styles, inclusion of a variety of learning methodologies and various assignments will enhance learning in all students.

Student-centered classes where student learning styles and personal histories are valued provide a means to push students beyond their comfort zone to experience learning in multiple ways. The paucity of nursing literature on teaching across the generations makes it difficult for faculty to independently develop learning strategies that effectively cross the generations. Therefore, we recommend that the content in the article be used as a topic for a faculty/administrative workshop or discussion that enables faculty to expand upon the ideas presented here and develop context appropriate teaching methods that address the generational diversity in their nursing courses.

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