

Educating the Millennial Student: Some Challenges for Academics

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Abstract

This report initiates research to identify issues facing academics in teaching the millennial student. Current teaching strategies, especially the formal lecture will be contrasted to the learning styles of the students. A better understanding of how these net generation students learn is required. Using a combination of traditional and new technology approaches is advocated.

Introduction

There are many academics employed in South African universities who are baby boomers (born at the end of World War II). They will have many decades of teaching experience and will probably have reared their own children years. Despite their knowledge of young people and their years of teaching, the teaching practices employed don't seem to be working particularly well (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005).

Educators are facing many new challenges in the 21st century. Specifically at many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, there is a general concern regarding poor lecture attendance. In addition, there are concerns regarding high student stress, low student motivation and more demanding students who are under-performing.

This paper identifies some of the current challenges facing academics using the Department of Information Systems at UCT as an example. A description of millennium students and their broad characteristics is presented, along with their life preferences and their learning styles. A brief discussion of how information technology (IT) can enhance their learning is offered.

The Current University Pressures

The South African government requires HEIs to increase throughput rates. To incentivise this, part of the new subsidy provided by the government to run universities will be linked to the pass rates of students.

The pressure on university budgets is a continuing issue and new innovative sources of revenue need to be developed. Increasing the budget to provide more student support is not going to be acceptable.

The student body has become increasingly diverse with large numbers of students coming to university under-prepared. There has been a “creeping inflation” in matric scores of new students and serious consideration must be given to using alternative admissions testing which has been successfully applied for several years to attract students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The student evaluation process itself is changing in 2006 at UCT to reduce the emphasis on examinations and to focus more on continuous assessment. Linked to this move, there is a disturbing increase in plagiarism and cheating by students and major efforts have to be being introduced to identify when this takes place and to determine consistent punishment policies.

With a substantial increase in IT support facilities provided to the student, there has been a corresponding drop in lecture attendance. There are several important reasons for this which will be discussed later.

So, who is this *net generation* student?

It has been argued that the *Net Generation* has different education requirements to the Generation X and Baby Boomer generations. As Prensky (2001) puts it, “Today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach”. (The net generation are also known variously as Generation Y, Generation Google and the Millennials).

According to Howe & Strauss (2000), the net generation (or millennial) student:

- was born in or after 1982,
- gravitates toward group activity,
- 8 out of 10 say “it’s cool to be smart”
- focused on grades and performance
- busy with extracurricular activities
- Identify with parents’ values;
- feel close to parents
- respectful of social conventions and institutions
- fascination for new technologies
- racially and ethnically diverse

Oblinger (2005) demonstrates some of the values in a light hearted way by identifying their experiences as including:

- Ctrl + Alt + Del is as basic as ABC
- They have never been able to find the “return” key
- Computers have always fitted their backpacks
- Photographs have always been processed in an hour or less
- Petrol has always been unleaded

Prensky (2003) points out that by age 21, a person would typically have completed

- 10,000 hours video games
- 200,000 emails
- 20,000 hours TV

- 10,000 hours cell phone
- *Under* 5,000 hours reading

Educators should anticipate that the net generation learner will expect to be digitally connected, will want to experiment, will want things immediately and will thrive on social interaction (Oblinger, 2005). From these requirements, the learning approach best suited for them might include aspects like:

- Teams, peer-to-peer
- Engagement & experience
- Visual & kinesthetic
- Things that matter

Whilst current faculty remains a mix of mainly baby boomers with some Generation Xers, there is a vast difference in value systems of the millennial student as proposed in Figure 1 by Oblinger (2005).

STUDENT	ACADEMIC
Multitasking	Single or limited tasks
Picture, sound, video	Text
Random access	Linear, logical, sequential
Interactive and networked	Independent and individual
Engaging	Disciplined
Spontaneous	Deliberate

Figure 1 - Different approaches

Courseware design must take account of these differences. Ensuring that an appropriate mix of traditional and contemporary teaching approaches could be the required approach. A balance between teamwork and technology to incorporate face-to-face facilities, online facilities, and social network is advocated (Oblinger, 2005).

The Current Teaching Model at UCT

All courses in the Department of Information Systems at UCT provide web-based facilities to students. This takes continuous effort by the lecturer.

Whilst all lecturers use Powerpoint slides in their material, this has been identified as problematic in many cases. Some academics argue that the use of a traditional chalk board approach in a lecture is superior to laundry lists sometimes produced on Powerpoint slides (the Powerpoint-less syndrome) Many course deliverables are handed in using an automated process. All deliverables are subjected to a plagiarism check using the software service Turnitin. This requires effort by the lecturer and some judgement regarding punishment.

The use of interactive online tools, like the locally-produced Dynamic Frequently Asked Questions facility (DFAQ), improves communication with students, but creates a considerable overhead for the lecturer.

Are these technology support systems attractive to the millennial student and do they enhance the learning process? According to Jarmon (2004), considerable benefits have been gained by many universities experimenting with multiple learning approaches utilizing various online technologies. However, there is a substantial overhead to all of these approaches which must be carefully managed. One approach which has been very successful is the use of a team comprising an Administrator, Faculty experts, Technology expertise and Assessment assistance.

Summary

The academics, especially the baby boomers and grey-beards, face many challenges. Understanding the student and their learning preferences is one of these major challenges. The net generation brings to universities a student with different characteristics. How this person learns needs to be better understood. Using a broad range of traditional and technological approaches appears to improve the experience and increase the success rate of the net generation student. Technology adoption by the current "baby boomer" faculty is therefore vital for success.

It is clear from the above that the educator must adapt to the needs of the millennial student and not vice versa.

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