Teaching Millennials:
Library Instruction for the Next Generation

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Introduction

College and university librarians, like all others, work to meet the needs of their users. This mission is accomplished in a number of ways in the academic environment from purchasing materials specific to the institution’s curriculum to increasing public services to developing library instruction for the student population.

Today’s college and university users are changing. These students are known as the “Millennials,” the “Net Generation,” the “Echo Boomers,” and “Generation Y.” This paper will refer to these students as “Millennials.” Neil Howe and William Strauss, authors of Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation, define the beginning of the generation with those born in 1982 and suggest that this demographic has a variety of characteristics that set them apart from previous generations. Howe and Strauss point to research and antidotes supporting that, more than former generations, Millennials work while they are students, see themselves as consumers of education, want customization in all aspects of their lives, have a positive view of technology, are confident in their abilities, are visual learners, multitask, and get bored easily. Though there are always individuals within a group that don’t share all the group characteristics, these are some of the general traits of Millennials described in Howe and Strauss’s groundbreaking book.

Lee Rainie, in a recent speech to the Public Library Association, suggested that the Millennial generation will continue to push learning and research to be more self directed, focused on group knowledge, open to interdisciplinary work, and focused on producing content (Rainie 16).

The distinct characteristics of the Millennial generation that this paper will focus on include an affinity for technology, growing up in an information rich environment, an interest in doing and achieving, and the implications of these for learning styles. Understanding these
general characteristics will help librarians understand the unique needs of this generation, and thus we can tailor library instruction to be most effective for our audience.

**Technology**

Millennials have lived their lives in a technological world. The oldest Millennials were twelve years old when Netscape came into existence. They were sixteen when Google came onto the scene. Twenty percent of college students first started using computers between the ages of five and eight and all of today’s college students began using computers before high school graduation (Rainie 2). Millennials don’t see computers, cell phones, and MP3 players as technology; they see these technologies as an integral part of their life (Merritt 6). They approach these technologies the way Generation X saw television and how the Boomers saw the refrigerator. Technology that has been around for someone’s entire life doesn’t seem like new technology, it’s just another tool. Some Millennials, though, connect with technology so much that they say technology is a key part of their identity (Manuel 4).

One reason Millennials connect with technology so much is that their world is full of gadgets. Over half of the Millennial generation live in homes with radios, CD or tape players, televisions, cable or satellite televisions, premium television channels, VCR or DVD players, video game consoles, computers, and Internet access; forty-six percent have high speed Internet access (Rainie 4). Much of Millennials’ technology is mobile. Sixty-one percent of Millennials have discmans or walkmans, fifty-five percent have handheld video game players, forty-five percent have cell phones, thirty-seven percent have MP3 players, twenty-six percent have laptops, thirteen percent have handheld Internet devices, and eleven percent have PDAs (Rainie 7). Millennials may have high exposure to technology and gadgets, but most of their use of such tools is in their personal life. They see a lot of the technology, like e-mail, cell phones, text
messaging, and the Internet, as tools for social communication (Brower 6). This way of using technology teaches Millennials to multitask. They use the phone, computer, the Internet, instant messaging, music, and television in conjunction with each other. This level of experiences leads to boredom when they’re doing a task that requires just one channel (Manuel 12).

This experience has created high expectations for technology use in education. If teaching occurs in one channel, they are likely to be bored and uninterested. As their world is heavily shaped by technology, they expect integrated information technology into their classrooms and educational experiences (Merritt 9). Students are often so experienced with technology that they feel more advanced than their teachers and are unimpressed with the use of technology in the classroom (Gardner and Eng 7). Students who have been whizzing around their desktops may lose respect for a teacher who has trouble toggling between a PowerPoint presentation and websites. If they are experts at shortcuts and see the instructor has to take the long way to do something, they may feel that the instructor has nothing to teach them.

Library instruction has included skilled use of databases and OPACs for some time. This background has given librarians experience teaching with technology and the opportunity to polish their teaching utilizing the Internet. This combined with Millennials’ expectations and experience can actually help when librarians are leading library instruction for a Millennial audience. Millennials may prefer library instruction, with computer components, rather than a traditional lecture. They may take to online resources, databases, and OPACs more than they do for traditional print sources (Manuel 4). They also see technology as a way to develop relationships, both socially and with instructors (Merritt 9). This may be useful when encouraging students to e-mail, instant message, or get in touch with the librarian for further personal research sessions.
Traditional information literacy courses are often taught in order from print to the web, which is familiar for Boomers, but may be the opposite of Millennials’ experiences. Millennials, who have primary experience with the web, learn the importance of print materials after they’ve learned to value the Internet (Manuel 5). Also, the enthusiasm Millennials tend to have for technology may make them less receptive for discussions of any downsides to technology (Manuel 5).

**Information Rich Environment**

Millennials’ technological environment often includes an immersion in an information rich environment. Over half the Millennial generation uses e-mail, uses the Internet to find information about movies and television, plays online games, gets news, uses instant messaging, finds information about schools, seeks political news, and downloads music (Rainie 8). Millennials greatly outpace their elders in their use of the Internet for finding information about movies and television, playing online games, downloading music, reading blogs, sharing their own creations, downloading videos, and creating blogs (Rainie 8). This constant involvement with the online world has led Millennials to expect continual access to information (Merritt 9). A recent Pew report illustrates their dependence on the Internet. It indicated that seventy-three percent of college students use the Internet more than the library, while only nine percent said they use the library more than the Internet (Rainie 3).

The Internet, though, is organized in an entirely different way than the library, and includes different types of information. Students searching the Internet often see parts of the whole and read sections out of context; it’s rare they deal with an entire website, journal, or book (Gardner and Eng 6). Millennials experience “knowledge fragmentation” in which information is considered equally valid, whether it is thought of in context or not (Brower 7). Instruction
Librarians should consider how using the Internet impacts what Millennials believe is true, how it influences where they find information, and what information literacy means in this type of environment (Merritt 7).

In one study of Millennials, all respondents said that the “huge increase in information sources that has come with the development of the Web” hasn’t affected their ability to judge the quality of information. Ninety-three percent believed that since many people use the Internet, misinformation would likely be detected, and most thought they were “expert at searching the Web” (Manuel 4). A recent OCLC report stated that ninety-three percent of respondents “agree Google provides worthwhile information.” A 2000 survey of a basic information literacy course showed that ninety percent of students thought they were expert at searching the web, sixty-three percent thought efficient research starts with the web, and twenty-eight percent believed that a “Central Internet Authority” checked websites for accuracy (Manuel 5).

This Internet experience has led students to have an “ATM attitude” towards research; they want it to be quick and easy. This expectation leads students to feel comfortable with a “compromise on quality in favor of low costs (in terms of time and effort) and convenience” (Gardner and Eng 8). Millennials also expect their education to match their experience with technology, customization, and personal assistance (Manuel 9). It’s wise to emphasize customization in databases and OPACs when teaching Millennial students (Kipnis and Childs 5).

Most problematic, and useful to keep in mind, is that Millennials believe they are research experts since they have such positive web experiences. Since they have a lifetime of experience searching the Internet, they may overestimate their ability to search, find, and evaluate information (Manuel 4). Library instructors need to realize this as they plan class instruction and activities. Allowing students to share their expertise, as well as focusing on new
skills the students may not have acquired, may allow them to continue feeling good about their research abilities while opening their mind to new types of research.

**Doers and Achievers**

There are some general personality differences that Millennials exhibit that set them apart from previous generations in addition to technology exposure. Millennial students tend to be motivated, ambitious, and high achievers (Gardner and Eng 3). They grew up with parents who taught them that they need to do a lot early in life in order to be successful later. This childhood period has been called “apprentice adulthood” by some (Merritt 5). A busy childhood means students begin college with credit hours, they expect value-added classes, and they expect that college will lead to graduate school or a job (Merritt 9). Students also expect personal support for their achievement. Millennials are used to parents doing a lot for them, and they anticipate other adults will help them through their education (Merritt 9).

The Millennials' expectation that achievements are important, and need to pay off with employability after they graduate, means that education needs to be focused on applicable skills that will help them meet their goals. If library instruction is tied to the "real" world, Millennials will be more inclined to think it is important and devote energy to learning the information. Millennials want information at the point-of-need and concisely. They don’t necessarily care how the library is organized and the theory of classification; they just want good information that will help them finish their homework (Costello, Lenholt, and Stryker 6). To give them this type of clear and pointed information, it is helpful to start instruction sessions with a clear outline of goals and an explanation of why the workshop is relevant (Kipnis and Childs 2). It can also be useful to point out a real life situation, such as the case at Johns Hopkins in which better research
may have prevented a death in a scientific study, to show that good research can be really useful, and less thorough research can have negative outcomes (Kipnis and Childs 3).

To tie into Millennials' expectations of personal support, it can be helpful to offer multiple options for personal assistance (Kipnis and Childs 7). Providing opportunities for one-on-one help during a library instruction session, advertising for personal research sessions, and making it clear that librarians are available through multiple channels helps the students know that librarians will offer personal support and lets them know that librarians are people who will help them with their academic goals.

**Learning Styles**

The Millennial generation comes to the classroom with different technological experiences, a vast background in using the Internet, and expectations of achievement. They also come to the classroom with different learning styles. Millennials grew up in an environment filled with television, video games, computers, and sophisticated multimedia experiences (Manuel 7; Kipnis and Childs 3). This background has created a preference for holistic processing and nonlinear modes of instruction in which students would rather see the entire picture, and then learn details, concepts, and procedures (Manuel 8).

This multimedia background also has implications for reading versus seeing. Average students retain ten percent of what they read, but twenty to thirty percent of what they see (Manuel 6). Millennial students also do much of their reading on a computer screen, which is quite different from books. Links stand out as important and draw readers away from the topic at hand (Manuel 7). Students read bits and pieces of information as they come across them, without reading for context. This bite-sized reading leads students to avoid lengthy prose, and, in fact, they may ignore lengthy text instructions (Manuel 7).
Library literature has indicated, for some time, that lecture isn’t as effective as active learning opportunities either. Students prefer active learning. Opportunities for hands-on activities have the added benefit of allowing for one-on-one feedback on their performance (Costello, Lenholt, and Stryker 5). Merely following along with the presentation on an individual computer, and clicking on links as the instructor does, gives the students an interactive involvement that is preferable to lecture (Costello, Lenholt, and Stryker 5).

Finally, the professional literature indicates that Millennial students trust their peers and prefer to work with them in the learning process. Students may prefer approaching a peer to a librarian and may distrust authority figures like librarians and teachers (Gardner and Eng 9; Kipnis and Childs 6). A recent OCLC report shows that sixty-seven percent of college students learn about electronic information sources from friends, compared to thirty-three percent from librarians (DeRosa et al. 38). Providing opportunities for group work and problem solving allows for students to learn from others who share their values and are people they respect (Kipnis and Childs 6). Instructors can facilitate group activities, providing feedback and one-on-one support, pulling teaching methods from several techniques that Millennials prefer.

**Conclusion**

Millennials are a distinct generation with several reoccurring characteristics that can impact library instruction. The way they approach learning and research is shaped by the environment in which they grew up (Rainie 15). Qualities that set the Millennial Generation apart include high exposure to technology, incredible information availability, a drive for achievement, and learning styles that include active, hands-on learning, a consumerist approach to education, and team work. Every person in the Millennial generation doesn’t exemplify all these characteristics, but it is useful for instruction librarians to have an understanding of some of
the broad traits this generation shares. Librarians can then have an idea of how teaching can be adapted for the newest generation and the best ways meet the needs of their users.
**Works Cited**


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