

Creative Communication Strategies for Multigenerational Students

Dr. Risa Blair
Instructional Associates, LLC
Miami Shores, FL, 33150/EST, United States

ABSTRACT

It is essential to be inclusive in online communication strategies to connect with all students. The challenges in the online environment are many. Professors do not necessarily see their students, so they are limited in their ability to communicate and make connections. To that end, it is important for professors to make every effort to reach all students, particularly students of all ages. The focus of this paper is to explore the backgrounds and technology used by the different generations, preferences for communications, and strategies to engage learners.

Keywords: Communication, Online Education, Generations, Teaching, Technology, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Y, Generation Z.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the earliest days of organized university online learning in the mid-1990's, younger students were restricted from even signing up for online classes if they were under 25. The thought was that online learning would be a distraction for these students, and that they would not have the discipline or motivation to be successful.

The learning landscape has changed significantly over time. More than six million Americans are pursuing online degrees. The average age of online students is 32, and 68% of these students are experienced professionals seeking career changes or advancement through online education. Most colleges and universities with online degree programs maintain a low student to instructor ratio – typically 25:1. The same cannot be said about on campus courses, particularly introductory courses. Additionally, online degrees generally cost less, as there are no fees for dormitories, meal plans,

parking, and other expenses (University of Texas at El Paso, 2018). Finally, online degree programs are delivered in a variety of modalities, from modularized to shortened semesters and year-round courses. Students may have the opportunity to complete their degrees sooner, as some online programs run continuously, have shorter terms, and accept prior learning experience as evaluated through rigorous assessments and testing.

2. TODAY'S ONLINE STUDENTS

Today's online students bring a variety of skills and challenges to the online classroom. The older students generally have work experience, are somewhat anxious to return to school, and are not always so technologically savvy. On the other hand, the younger students are quite technologically savvy, but the skills they have with technology do not necessarily apply to their online studies. They have limits in terms of embracing the learning transfer. They are capable of ordering the latest video game or streaming a Netflix movie, but do not understand the process (or perhaps importance) of seeking technical support or using the online library for their school classes. The younger students lack identity, as they have not necessarily worked in a career field. In fact, with the mix of students of all ages and abilities, the online classroom is much closer to a typical work environment than a face-to-face classroom (Sullivan, 2012).

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GENERATIONS

Generations Chart

Generation	Birth Year Range
Baby Boomers	1946 - 1964
Gen X	1965 – 1980
Millennials/Gen Y	1981 – 1995
Gen Z	Born after 1995

Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers are now living with aging brains. Even the youngest Baby Boomers are now 55 years old. To that end, the Boomers appreciate repetition and interpret material that is familiar to them as the truth. They have a hard time overcoming distraction. They are willing to consider multiple viewpoints and have longer attention spans than the other generations (Neff, 2012). The Baby Boomers have a strong work ethic, are not afraid to put in a hard and long day at work, and derive their self-worth through their professional achievements. To that end, it is challenging for Baby Boomers to effectively manage work/life balance. They have a tendency to lean on the side of work, as their strong work ethic pushes them to do their very best. Baby Boomers are self-assured, independent, and competitive. They are more driven by intrinsic motivation than extrinsic motivation. Baby Boomers are goal driven and goal directed with strong attention spans and resourcefulness (Pappas, 2016).

Gen X

Today, Gen Xers are more ethnically diverse, and even better educated than the Baby Boomers, as more than 60% of this group have attended college. Gen Xers were born into dual-income families with rising divorce rates. The economy was failing. Women were actively engaged in the workforce. These children were left home alone and became the latch-key kids. To that end, Gen X rose to the challenge, became independent, self-sufficient, and resourceful. They took on responsibility in the workplace and valued their freedom. They dislike authority and work hour structure. They want to do their work their way in their timeframe. At the same time, the manufacturing jobs were leaving, the service jobs were ramping up to rebuild and renew the economy. This generation mastered the technologies available to be successful, including smartphones, PDAs, computers, tablets, email, and other tools. They witnessed their parents lose jobs they had worked so hard to earn. As a result, their commitment to a single employer is greatly reduced. Their focus is on getting ahead, even if that means changing jobs and learning new skills. Gen X works to live and does not live to work (Kane, 2019).

Millennials/Gen Y

The Millennials are untethered and comfortable and familiar with multiple devices to deliver content

(laptops, phones, tablets, and more). Most own a game console (Nielsen, 2013). Millennials are presently the most highly educated generation in the United States, in that they have more college and graduate degrees than the Baby Boomers or the Gen Xers. They truly value employers who encourage them to pursue career paths and support education. Since Millennials have short attention spans, they are clever in scanning complex digital landscapes and retrieving specific information. The content must be relevant to career advancement, and fresh and current for them. They are savvy with social media. In fact, many are addicted to social media, and get their news from Twitter and Facebook. They often refer to YouTube for entertainment as well as learning. They thrive on community learning and appreciate the process of leaving comments, rating sites and training, and sharing feedback with others. They are highly visual learners who enjoy videos to learn. They expect online learning to be engaging and fun (Troussov, 2017).

Gen Y students view their education as a means to an end. This generation of students and subset of learners are not avid readers and digesters. They are scanning the content and used to surfing the Internet. They tackle the required reading for their courses in much the same way. They seek immediate and direct feedback. Although the younger students are technologically savvy, they do want personal contact and attention. They seem to be in a hurry with completing their work and assignments. They seek to gain the information they need to be productive and to meet their goals. These same students want a solid knowledge base and want to tie what they are learning to the real world. They expect clear explanations of material and assignments. They would like to be challenged and clearly see the connections of what they are learning to their future career aspirations. They are somewhat demanding of faculty and expect customer service (Sullivan, 2012).

Gen Z

Gen Z has always known the Internet and has used a smartphone and other devices from an early age. They have an affinity for texting and using apps, messaging, and using online platforms. In fact, this sometimes may be their preference over face-to-face communication. Gen Z is bombarded with information every day, and tends to spend hours on social media and canvassing the Internet to find

information. This generation is highly visual and prefers to learn from videos, storytelling, and other visual techniques. Gen Z is classified as being somewhat more independent than their parents, as technology and the Internet has allowed them to start earning money much than their parents were able to do so, as they view Instagram and YouTube as opportunities to earn income. Gen Z has an even shorter attention span than the previous generations. The 8-second filter, as it is called allows these learners to quickly filter through content and curate what is important to them. To that end, it is essential for eLearning and education to become part of what is curated in that process. Once one has their attention, they are loyal learners. They are adept at multitasking, as they easily make their way through massive amounts of content and can process and absorb exactly what they need. Gen Z relies on social media connections for studying and connecting with classmates and professors. In fact, while they are doing their homework, they are also likely listening to music, texting friends, watching TV or using some other social media (Jolley, 2019).

4. COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES OF THE GENERATIONS

Chart 1: An overview of the working generations

Characteristics	Millennials (1981-1996)	Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	Generation X (1965-1980)	Generation Y (1981-1996)	Generation Z (born after 1995)
Formative experiences	Second World War Economic boom Rock 'n' roll Diverse gender roles Particularly for women	Post-War boom Space Age Apollo Moon landings Health care Family-oriented Rise of the teenager	Great Depression Fall of Berlin Wall Reggie/Gothique The Internet Lack of a clear career path Early mobile technology Early use of the Internet	9/11 terrorist attacks Regulation Economic boom Economic crisis Social media Gadgets Early mobile technology Early use of the Internet	9/11 terrorist attacks Global warming Global focus Mobile devices Economic boom Social media Produce own media Cloud computing Work-life
Percentage in U.K. workforce	3%	33%	35%	29%	Currently employed in either part-time jobs or new apprenticeships
Aspiration	Home ownership	Job security	Work-life balance	Freedom and flexibility	Security and stability
Attitude toward technology	Largely disengaged	Early information technology (IT) adopters	Digital immigrants	Digital Natives	"Technoholics" - entirely dependent on IT, limited grasp of alternatives
Attitude toward career	Jobs are for life	Organisational - careers are defined by employers	Early "portfolio" careers - loyal to profession, not necessarily to employer	Digital entrepreneurs - work "with" organisations not "for"	Career nihilism - will move seamlessly between organisations and "start-up" businesses
Signature product	Automobile	Television	Personal Computer	Tablet/Smart Phone	Google Glass, smartphone, photo-computing, 3-D printing, driverless cars
Communication media	Formal letter	Telephone	E-mail and instant messaging	Text or social media	Hand held or integrated into clothing/communication devices
Communication preference	Face-to-face	Face-to-face really, but telephone or email if required	Text messaging or e-mail	Online and mobile (text messaging)	Facetime
Formative or formative financial decisions	Face-to-face meetings	Face-to-face meetings but increasingly will go online	Online - will prefer face-to-face if time permitting	Face-to-face	Screened or virtually cloud sourced

(Zeestraten, 2013)

One can see from this chart that Gen Z prefers handheld devices and Facetime for communicating. The Apple watch would be a device of choice for this generation, too. This group is classified as “technoholics”, and is dependent on IT. Gen Y prefers texting and social media. This group’s choice of devices includes tablets and smartphones. Gen X prefers email and texting. The Baby Boomers prefer face-to-face communication and the phone.

5. TECHNOLOGY TOOLS TO PROMOTE COMMUNICATION

There are a variety of tools to use to promote communication. Since in the online classroom the professor does not necessarily know the demographic information about the learners, it is essential to work toward capturing the attention of the learners and engage those learners throughout the course. To that end, it is important to use a cross section of tools (see the list below). Remind allows you to connect with the classroom, send texts to the class, as well as individual students. Students can also text you. Remind is not connected to the professor’s phone number. Voicemails are left as audio clips and go right to the professor’s email. Vocaroo allows one to create and deliver a voice recording. This is a useful tool for assessment, as students can hear a professor’s voice. The recording resides as an anonymous link and sits in the cloud. There is no upload or download. Jing is a simple and free download from Techsmith for doing screen capture and walk-thru videos, which will be upgraded in early 2020 since it is presently Flash-based. Pablo allows you to create simple and quick downloadable posters which are useful and engaging for online course announcements. Lumen is also free, runs in the cloud, and allows one to make beautiful videos (quickly and easily) with pictures and text. With Google Voice, one can get a free number in any area code and direct the calls to one’s own cell. Of course, one may take advantage of PowerPoint video rendering, Twitter, homemade or existing YouTube videos, graphics, and text (announcements or topical articles) to embrace all of the learning styles, too. In fact, there can and should be overlap in using the tools to appeal to the different learners and communication preferences.

- Remind - <https://assets.remind.com/marketing/pdfs/3-steps-to-get-started-with-remind.pdf>
- Vocaroo - <https://vocaroo.com/> (voice)
- Jing - <https://www.techsmith.com/jing-tool.html> (screen capture and walk-thru videos)
- Pablo - <https://pablo.buffer.com/> (MYO posters)
- Lumen - <https://lumen5.com/dashboard/> (MYO videos)
- Google Voice – Free second number in any area code

- PowerPoint videos (pic in pic), Twitter, Videos-YouTube channel, Graphics, Text
- Embrace all learning styles

7. FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

What is next? Online learning will continue. On campus institutions will continue to be threatened. Online education and degree completion may be faster, as more courses are offered at more rapid pace. Online education is also less expensive, as students do not need to pay for room and board and additional on-campus fees. More and more college-age (and beyond) learners will enroll in online programs as they see the need to pursue education to either change careers or advance in their present careers. The demand will increase for online professors to fully engage their students. Even over the course of the last 10 years, this online professor has seen far more demands made, including commitment to performing outreach, involvement with retention, maintaining relationships with students in the class, and overall a far more hands-on approach to “owning” the class rather than just teaching it. The students are eager to learn and reach their end goals of completing their degrees, but not so well-equipped to effectively manage their time, follow directions, and meet deadlines. There are far more concessions made in online courses to retain students. In the end, the online professor becomes an “edutainer,” responsible for educating and entertaining students, too. The online communication tools to engage learners help to focus the students back on what they need to do for the weekly activities, including discussions, papers, assignments, projects, eLearning publisher exercises, group work, and labs.

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