

Chapter 7

Millennial Adult Learners in the 21st Century: Implications for Adult and Community Educators

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ABSTRACT

Millennials and their learning needs are in general misunderstood. Little research on how millennials prefer to learn, work, and live has contributed to unproductive, contradictory notions about this generation to the detriment of all. More research is clearly needed to better understand the current and future behaviors of millennials. A wide array of advancing technologies and their direct applications to online and face-to-face learning contexts are explored as means to engaging millennials more in adult learning endeavors. Best practices in employing technologies in the classroom, such as promoting interactivity and social presence through blogs and YouTube, are highlighted in online contexts and through course design. How technology impacts those who have not had exposure to technology is explored as well.

INTRODUCTION

Adult education historically has been part of a US educative system apart from K-12 and higher education in the sense that it focused more on educating for social change (Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). More recently, however, adult educative

activities in communities as well as workplaces (e.g., GED completion) have been more aligned with meeting pressing societal needs for a highly skilled workforce and creating competitive advantage (Reio, Wormley, & Boyle, 2005). Adult educators have used Web 2.0 technologies (e.g., wikis, blogs, podcasts) in particular to address these needs in exciting new ways by facilitating not only adult learners' curiosity and self-directed

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5780-9.ch007

learning (Crim & Reio, 2010), but also communication, social information sharing and knowledge development, and community and network formation (Lippincott, 2010; Wisniewski, 2010).

Facebooking, blogging and tweeting are some of the things that adults do routinely to share information among friends and learn, especially millennials (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012). Millennials are defined as those born between 1979 and 1994 (Smola & Sutton, 2002) and represent the first generation to always have had access to a computer (Chitiga, Chogugudza, & Chitigia, 2011). Generational clashes between millennials (also known as Nexters, Generation Y), Generation Xers (GenXers; those born between 1964 and 1978) and baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1963) can occur unnecessarily if care is not taken to address differing expectations of behavioral norms in contexts ranging from the classroom and the community to the workplace (Sweeney, 2005). For example, millennials and those born in prior generations (e.g., baby boomers) tend to communicate and ask questions differently, have a different work ethic, and give feedback differently. Moreover, millennials prefer learning experientially and continuously, but tend to read less than previous generations (Sweeney, 2005).

It seems clear therefore that adult educators may need a different skill set when conveying information and facilitating meaningful learning with millennials. Adult and community educators will need to make sure adult millennial learners have reasonable access to information, allow for collaborative and experiential learning opportunities, design courses to more closely meet millennials' needs and retrain themselves to meet the needs of this group (Sweeney, 2005). The purpose of this chapter is to present issues and trends in adult and community education learning contexts as they relate to the millennial generation and include implications for adult and community educator practice.

BACKGROUND

We present the issues, controversies, and problems related to adult educators working with millennials. Although technology use as a means of communication and learning is increasing among each generation (e.g., in 2009, the fastest growing demographic on Facebook was female 55-65 year-olds; Deal, Altman, & Rosenberg, 2010), we focus on millennials because their values and beliefs are most closely aligned with technology (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Cellphones, the Internet, and social networks grew up with the millennial generation, making technology for them a sort of “sixth sense, a way of knowing and interacting with the world” (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010, p. 213). Thus, because of their earlier exposure to technology, millennials are more comfortable with technology and its use for communicating and learning than previous generations (Deal et al., 2010). Yet, millennials seem to eschew great books and scholarly wisdom in favor of online information and peer opinion often lacking in accuracy and validity workplace (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). Moreover, millennials read far fewer books with concomitant reductions in reading and writing performance in classrooms and the workplace (Wisniewski, 2010). Millennials must not only learn how to cull *valid* information from disparate data sources, but also apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information for creating the new knowledge necessary for solving today and tomorrow's vexing problems. It is here where adult and community educators can be most effective by assisting millennials in developing their basic work skills and advanced technological skills. First, we highlight technological advances and their links to adult learning, followed by recommendations for best practices for adult and community programs, implications for training, future trends, and the conclusion.

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