

Chapter 5

Generational Learners & E-Learning Technologies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the characteristics of learners of different generations. In particular, it compares their differences in terms of learning preferences as well as their typical skills and attitudes towards technology in e-learning. In addition, it discusses the impacts of these shared and varied learner characteristics on e-learning and provides suggestions and recommendations on how to address generational learning diversity in e-learning design and delivery. In responding to the emerging learning technologies, this chapter specifically analyzes generational learners' preferences and characteristics regarding learning technologies, and the practical implications for designers and educators working on e-learning for highly diversified audiences representing various generations.

INTRODUCTION

The frenzied pace in which e-learning courses and programs have increased in K-12 and higher education settings as well as in training environments has attracted a seemingly endless stream of enrollments from a huge, diverse population of younger as well as more mature learners into the e-learning phenomenon. In many e-learning events today, it is common to see a wide range of diversity among the participants, such as, background, lifestyle, learning

preferences, and social and political inclinations. Of course, they also differ in terms of gender, ethnicity, nationality, and personality traits. While such differences were also true in traditional, face-to-face settings, they are perhaps more noticeable when teaching online; especially the age differences in higher education settings. It is quite evident from the enrollment rosters that the learner base in higher education is no longer the highly homogenous 18-24-year-olds. Unfortunately, however, e-learning designers and educators have yet to respond proactively to the changing learner demographics and their rapidly increasing diversity.

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In addition to the differences in students' preferred learning styles (e.g., Bonk & Zhang, 2006, 2008; Santo, 2006; Zhang & Bonk, 2008), generational differences in the workplace as well as in education are increasingly apparent and are receiving increasing attention from researchers, educators, and managers (e.g., Appel, 2003; Dede, 2005; Dieterle, Dede, & Schrier, 2007; Kruse, 2004; Lippincott, 2006; Reins, 2002). Focusing on e-learning in particular, this chapter reviews prevailing generational differences with a special focus on their lifestyles and technology preferences. Such distinctiveness in how different generations of learners were taught or tend to learn, creates unique opportunities for the online trainer or instructor while simultaneously adding to the overall complexity of the encounter.

GENERATIONAL LIFESTYLES

With the increasing diversity apparent among online learners, it is crucial to understand their differences from a generational perspective; in particular, how they learn, how they prefer to learn, and how they would learn better (e.g., Appel, 2003; Dede, 2005; Oblinger, 2003). Current generations are typically placed into the following categories: (1) those born before 1946 are known as the mature or silent generation; (2) those born between 1946-1964 (or 1961) are labeled as Baby Boomers; (3) those born from 1965-1981 or 1961-1980 are known as Generation X, or the Xers; and (4) those born in 1980 (or 1982) and later are referred to as the Millennial Generation, Generation Y, the Net Generation, Nexters, or the Internet Generation.

However, such attempts to classify generations of people are never that simple. For instance, more recently, there is news about the Zippie or Generation Z (McKay, 2004). Zippies, or upwardly mobile youth (i.e., ages 15-25) of India who walk with a "zip in their stride" (Friedman, 2005, p. 184), were extensively spotlighted in Thomas Fried-

man's (2005) highly popular book, *The World is Flat*. With more than half of the population in India being under age 25, the Zippies are certainly a huge cohort group that deserve close attention in India, as well as in countries or regions with similar populations. The Zippie phenomenon in India (McKay, 2004), however, is more than a local occurrence, as it reflects to a certain degree the global trends regarding technology and mobility. In addition, with the ease of travel and immigration, such groups can be found anywhere globally, thereby impacting the design and delivery of e-learning throughout the world.

Instead of only impacting younger audiences, this flatter world, now filled with myriad Web 2.0 technologies, has been drastically altering the means for learning, sharing, and communicating across generations. Not too surprisingly, even the baby boomers have their own social networking site, the Zoomers (<http://network.zoomers.ca/>). One such zoomer, Moses Znaimer, a media innovator and broadcasting visionary in Canada, created this online multimedia community for the 50 plus with a vision of "aging with zip" (Cravit, 2008). In this community, Zoomers may share photos, videos, life style tips, post blogs, organize social events, form groups, chat, play games, and participate in forum discussions established there. Lifelong learning is evident in social networking sites like this, and actively among online communities of practice on social networks such as Ning (<http://ning.com>). These communities of learning and practice are powerful in informal learning, lifelong learning, and professional development, benefiting all users across ages and generations.

Gen Xer, Gen Nexter, Zippie, Zoomer, or millennial, each of these generational labels, to a certain degree, provide indicators of the most influential or representative characteristics or phenomena of that particular generation. Accordingly, such defining social events have shaped people with a set of shared characteristics, many of which relate to how we learn and gain experiences in the world at large. In effect, such events define who

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