How Generational Theory Can Improve Teaching: Strategies for Working with the "Millennials"

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Abstract

This article applies recent writing on the "Millennial Generation" to a range of pedagogical issues. Born between 1982 and 2003 and also known as Generation Y, the Millennials have been hailed as a new "Great Generation." According to William Strauss and Neil Howe, they display ambition, confidence, optimism, and a capacity for high-level cooperative work. At the same time, they measure high on scales of stress, conventionality, and over-reliance on parents. This internally complex set of traits calls for a variety of nuanced pedagogies, including balancing students' need for overall clarity with their sense of competence in co-designing key aspects of their educational experience. Incorporating a wide range of generational studies, including the latest (2008) publications in this area, the authors offer a variety of teaching strategies, some arising out of their own primary research.

Keywords

teaching, pedagogy, online, Millennials, Generation Y

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Introduction

We have been studying and teaching generational theory, both as an end in itself and as a source of new insights on teaching. Like many readers of this journal, we serve mostly "traditional" college students between 18 and 24. In generational terms, our classes brim with late-arriving Millennials—part of a birth cohort that started life between 1982 and 2003.[1] As we work to advance our skills as instructors—in traditional, on-line, and hybrid contexts—our findings about this generation have become strikingly salient. In what follows, we offer a set of teaching strategies derived from the interaction of this theoretical literature and our various classroom experiences. Briefly and generally characterized, we recommend four pedagogical "adaptations" to the Millennial "personality": enhanced clarity of both course structure and assignments; student participation in course design; pre-planned measures to reduce stress; and rigorous attention to the ethics of learning.

The Seven "Distinguishing Traits" of the Millennial Generation

The most widely accepted recent source in this area is the work of William Strauss and Neil Howe (1992), whose *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* launched a series of books and a major consultancy firm.[2] Driven both by the logic of their generational scheme and by observations of youth culture in the late 1990s, Strauss and Howe (2000) argued that post-Generation X children are an "heroic generation" similar to their celebrated "GI Generation" forebears.[3] Because Strauss and Howe see American history as a complex repetition of four generational types—Idealist, Reactive, Civic, and Adaptive—they tend to accentuate generational differences. Thus, the Millennials are "a direct reversal from the trends associated with Boomers" and "represent a sharp break from the traits that are associated with Generation X" (pp. 44-45). Idealists-in-the-making, Millennials are powerfully shaped by parental reaction to the perceived laxness of the Sixties and Seventies. Put another way, the rise of cultural and political conservatism in the U.S. is the most formative context of their upbringing.

In their now-canonical *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (Strauss & Howe, 2000), the authors identified seven key traits. We use these traits as both a framework and point of departure, making frequent references to the authors' influential later writings on the Millennials in the classroom.[4] While we obviously admire the Strauss and Howe's portrait of Gen Y, we find it wanting in a number of respects, and this will become evident as we share some of our own research as well as the perspectives of other theorists. One crucial shortcoming warrants comment at this juncture, however. We believe that Strauss and Howe's failure to deal adequately with the demographics and social reality of race, ethnicity and class in American society limits the usefulness of their work. Thus, colleague-readers who work in pluralistic (urban,

multi-racial, ethnically diverse) settings will occasionally find our analysis deficient. At the same time, some of the apparently-inapplicable traits we examine "drift" and "morph" interestingly when expressed in "minority" cultural contexts.[5]

Special

Unlike the Gen-Xers, a smaller group born during a period of relative social indifference to children, Millennials are a huge demographic, and one that was eagerly anticipated by their parents.[6] They are "the largest, healthiest, and most cared-for generation in American history" (Strauss & Howe, 2000, p.76). While having children seemed problematic—or even irresponsible—for many couples in the 1970's, a surprising cultural change-of-mind occurred thereafter, resulting in "a newfound love of children" (p. 80). This seismic shift was signaled in part by the last-chance efforts of highly-educated Boomer couples to conceive, with birthrates for women over forty skyrocketing between 1981 and 1997 (p. 79). Quite naturally, after all this work, parents were ready to celebrate their kids and sacrifice heavily for them. In turn, children have responded appreciatively. For example, a 2007 AP/MTV poll of 1,280 Millennials found that "spending time with family" was the top answer to the question, "What makes you happy?" (Noveck & Tompson, 2007).[7]

Sheltered

Since current media expose youth to pretty much *everything*, it is tempting to think of them as hardened veterans of the world. In fact, they have been more protected from harm than any generation in American history, as a dense structure of new regulations now guards children and adolescents. Strauss and Howe (2000) detail these regulations, noting that Millennials have been "buckled, watched, fussed over, and fenced in by wall-to-wall rules and chaperones" (p. 119). So thoroughgoing is this sheltering effort that a backlash seems underway. Thus, the ultra-popular *Parenting Teens*

with Love & Logic (2006) warns fathers and mothers against "helicopter" strategies when "braving the challenges of the Millennial Generation" (p.37). The title of Hara Marano's recent *A Nation of Wimps: The High Cost of Invasive Parenting* (2008) pungently captures the mood.

Confident

Young adults in the U.S. are a happy lot—or so polls indicate. According to Jocelyn Noveck and Trevor Tompson, a recent survey found that "72 percent of [Millennial] whites say they're happy with life in general..." (2007, n.p.a.).[8] They also are optimistic about their future prospects, particularly their economic standing, and Millennials tend to equate good news for themselves with good news for their country. "In Canada," write Strauss and Howe, "Millennials have been dubbed the 'Sunshine Generation'" (2000, p. 178). However, given 9/11, the second Iraq War, and interlocking economic and financial crises, such optimism may be fading. The New Politics Institute (2008) distinguishes among teen, transitional, and cusp Millennials, and we find this a helpful division. In terms of overall political and economic prospects, Teen Millennials (currently 15-19 years old) are the least optimistic subgroup, although they remain persistently optimistic about their own individual futures. In any case, most first-year college students arrive not as inwardly tormented Holden Caulfields but as self-assured go-getters.

Team-oriented

Millennials have long worked in task groups and are skilled in collaborative effort. "From Barney and soccer to school uniforms and a new classroom emphasis on group learning, Millennials are developing strong team instincts and tighter peer bonds," write Strauss and Howe (2000, p. 44). They see this trend as an outcome of the widespread rejection of tracking (whether for gifted or disabled students) in the name of bringing everyone into the mainstream. Such egalitarianism disposes

teachers to replace independent study with collaborative learning and peer review of performance (Twenge, pp. 180-211). Strauss and Howe link this striking facility for group work to the ever-increasing importance of the peer group in the lives of teens, emblemized by what these authors characterize as the extraordinary similarity in Millennial dress and appearance.

Achieving

Contemporary young adults have big plans, particularly about their careers. Boomers were also ambitious, but according to Strauss and Howe (2000), they embraced accomplishment in the arts and humanities in a way Millennials have not; further, Boomers were more internally driven—operating with an "inner compass." Strauss and Howe argue that Millennials respond best to external motivators and are highly rationalistic, making long-range plans and thinking carefully about "college financing, degrees, salaries, employment trends, and the like" (2000, pp. 182-183). While they are willing to put in the work, school for them is not something from which they expect enlightenment or personal transformation. "Work hard, play hard" is an important maxim for them.[9]

Pressured

Raised by workaholic parents in an economy designed for highly skilled labor, Millennials have internalized the message that they must build strong resumes—and fast. The same MTV/AP poll cited earlier also showed that young people "had a 10 percent higher stress rate than adults did in a 2006 AP-Ipsos poll. For ages 13 to 17, school is the greatest source of stress. For those in the 18-24 range, it's jobs and financial matters" (Noveck & Tompson, 2007, n.p.a.). Oddly, few students openly protest their tense situation. Competition with others makes the world better, they are convinced, and success is the natural outcome of effort. But the stakes are now higher. In the words of Strauss and Howe, they "feel stressed in ways that many of their parents never

felt at the same age. Pressure is what keeps them constantly in motion—moving, busy, purposeful, without nearly enough hours in the day to get it all done" (2000, p.184). College life is undoubtedly fun, but hanging over everything is the necessity of getting good grades. Not surprisingly, anxiety is the major health issue for our students (ADAA, 2007).

Conventional

"Family" is a keyword for the Millennials, as "alienation" was for the 1960's Boomers. Born in a divorce culture and aware of the fragility of the American family, these students tend to embrace measures that promise to strengthen or support it. As noted, recent surveys consistently show teens to be strongly attached to parents and siblings, especially their mothers. "Millennials are willing to accept their parents' values as stated—but they are starting to think they can apply them, and someday run the show, a whole lot better," wrote Strauss and Howe (2000, pp. 185-186). Tim Clydesdale (2007) agrees with this portrait, maintaining that first-year college students, rather than resisting convention, now simply "default" to the familiar American cultural standards embraced by their parents. These young people put their core identities in "lockboxes" which even the most values-challenging intellectual experiences cannot penetrate. Because many students team up with their parents to finance college education, family unity gains additional force, notes Clydesdale (p. 4).

Teaching the Millennial Student: Appropriate Strategies

Without taking Strauss and Howe to be the final word on a generational cohort consisting of over 75 million people (Deloitte, 2008), we think these seven characteristics provide an excellent point of departure for anyone seeking to fashion pedagogical schemes that have a chance of avoiding significant pitfalls. As indicated earlier, we have grouped our recommendations under four headings, which structure the next part of this paper. We advocate that instructors 1) strive for greater clarity in course structure, assignments, and grading expectations; 2) provide significant opportunities for student initiative, participation and choice; 3) incorporate stress-reduction mechanisms; and 4) engage students in a significant, course-long conversation on the ethical dimensions of taking a college class.

Clarify the Essentials when Preparing Syllabi, Assignments and Evaluation Instruments

Like many other teachers, our experience is that today's college students do not function well in courses with loosely organized, schematic syllabi. We suggest that instructors deliberately *over-estimate* the desire of students for clarity—and resist the temptation to regard those students as somehow deficient in character for the fervency of such a desire. Two of Strauss and Howe's (2000) key traits come vigorously into play here. That Millennial youth have been *sheltered* does not just mean that they have been kept safe through more protective parental practices and attitudes.[10] The business end of this cultural trend is a colossal new regime of "rules and devices" (2000, p. 43). One obviously relevant example here is the requirement that public high school teachers submit course syllabi and pacing guides at the beginning of each semester. Thus, with considerable justification, students expect the same predictable structure from college instructors. Important factors here are the objectives-driven learning environments they have experienced in high schools through the tightening of state curricula and the ubiquity of end-of-course testing (EOCs). The Millennials' emphasis on *achievement* bolsters this quest for order and clarity. Their extensive use of daily planners is indicative of this tendency, as well as their expectation that parents will remind them of deadlines. Like it or not, our students cannot afford to engage in lots of educational exploration, improvisation or open-ended spontaneity. The heyday of the brilliant, if diffuse, lecturer whose wisdom might just "change lives" is over.

Build in Significant Possibilities for Student Initiative and Creativity

While the Collaborative Learning movement has shortcomings—e.g., inadequate instructor training, excessive time spent in process activities, pressures to inflate grades—it does respond admirably to many of the generational characteristics so far described (Smith & MacGregor, 2008). Collaborative Learning capitalizes on the energizing *confidence* displayed by Millennials, seeing them as accomplished, self-starting, and creative. Put another way, all the lessons, camps, field trips, internships, and foreign travel provided/demanded by doting parents actually pay off in collaborative settings. Again, traditional "fountain-and-sponge" pedagogies (teacher: fountain, student: sponge) are rarely appropriate when one is dealing with "the Next Great Generation" (Strauss & Howe, 2000). We suggest letting their collaborative skills surface by inviting student input into the design of assignment types, grading systems or rubrics, and teamwork activities.

Millennials and Choice

Richard Sweeney has argued that "Millennials expect a much greater array of product and service selectivity. They have grown up with a huge array of choices and they believe that such abundance is their birthright" (2006, n.p.a.). Although this applies to all forms of teaching, certainly the online version of education that has grown up alongside the Millennials has followed this inclination. Thus, in *Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching*, Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt (2001) encourage online teachers to "establish guidelines for the class and participation that provide enough structure for the learners but allow for flexibility and negotiation" (p. 36).

In our own classes we have followed this injunction by allowing students to substitute a semester's worth of guided-question postings for one or more papers, do team presentations in lieu of individual ones, and work on real-time collaborative documents created via Google or other applications.[11] A colleague of ours is even trying out a collaborative on-line newspaper—including traditional layout, photographs, cartoons, and editorials—with regular deadlines for the "staff," and the encouragement that if students choose this activity, they are freed from selected assignments.

Should students have a hand in fashioning such key class parameters as learning objectives, syllabus, and assignments? Where this can be accomplished efficiently and with the clarity whose importance we have already emphasized, we strongly advocate such a shift, building on the robust tradition of student-centered learning. Although like many teachers trained in the older "sage on stage" tradition of lectureship and faced with an overload of students, we still find ourselves moving in this direction. The suggestion is attractive because it simultaneously addresses multiple traits of Millennials—their sense of being special, their confidence, and their general distaste for doing "busy work" that shows no relevance to personal goals. Cooperative design allows Millennial students to invest their own meaning into a class. It also acknowledges the fact that they come to the class with "strong resumes"—i.e., their high-achieving ways have resulted in the possession of unique strengths and talents from which the class can benefit.[12]

Millennials and Teamwork

The preference of Millennials for working in teams and their concomitant inclination towards social networking offers numerous advantages for college teachers. As numerous books with titles like *The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation Is Shaking Up the Workplace* (2008), *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace* (2000), and *When Generations Collide: Who They Are. Why They Clash. How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work* (2008) have now noted, young people are so skilled at and accustomed to teaming up that they are beginning to transform the post-college workplace.

In fact, Eve Tahmincioglu reports that some companies "are hiring groups of friends because they believe Gen Yers need to stay tight with their social network" (2007, n.p.a.). In college, team efforts now extend far beyond task groups and collaborative term papers. In a recent course on the Iraq War taught by a colleague of ours, students conceptualized and completed a documentary film about their progressively deeper engagement with this subject.[13] But one must proceed with caution. Our own survey of 71 Millennial students indicates that they do indeed strongly favor working in teams to working alone (51 preferred either small or large teams). However, smaller teams of two or three were viewed as optimal, largely to avoid logistical problems and the "free rider" phenomenon of non-contributing team members. (Only 11 opted for teams of five people, versus 40 for teams of two or three.)

Using teams as a significant part of a college course can be a far more challenging strategy than it is often made out to be. There are, for example, important ethical dimensions to the exercise, as Edmund J. Hansen and James A. Stephens note in their 2000, "The Ethics of Learner-Centered Education: Dynamics that Impede the Process," singling out "low tolerance for challenges" and "social loafing" as two problems that particularly impact team-based activities (p. 43). Quite apart from the mechanics of team operation, the norms that grow out of the practices of well-functioning teams—respect for fellow team members, deference to team leaders, and unswerving task-orientation—deserve attention and commentary. Also, to the extent possible, instructors must protect conscientious students both from free-loaders and enthusiastic but simply incompetent team members—unless learning to manage such issues is a primary part of the actual lesson plan.

From the Start, Help Students Understand and Manage Stress

Doesn't generational greatness include poise in the face of danger or stress, as it did so famously for the GIs? When it comes to academic stress, aren't a group of achievement-oriented, test-inured veterans of highly competitive secondary-education regimes prepared for the rigors of college? Few teaching professionals we know would answer these questions completely in the affirmative, for they understand that a significant percentage of our students are ill-prepared for their demands—especially in the areas of analytical reading, quantitative reasoning, application of prior knowledge, and scientific literacy. Recall that one of Strauss and Howe's traits was *pressured*. How they speak of this is significant: "Pushed to study hard, avoid personal risks, and take full advantage of the collective opportunities adults are offering them, Millennials feel a 'trophy kid' pressure to excel" (2000, p. 44). The unexamined assumption here is that admission to college confirms that one is actually equal to the college task. This is far from true, and many students secretly realize it.[14] More importantly, the cognitive demands of mathematics, the natural sciences, English, foreign languages and certain social sciences have greatly increased in the last quarter-century (Vásquez, 2006). The confidence and optimism that are so marked in this generation have a way of deserting students around the time of final exams.

The result of these trends is the college stress epidemic. So pronounced is this development that psychologist Jean M. Twenge speaks of "Generation Stressed" (2006, p. 104). Focusing on Harvard students, Richard D. Kadison and Theresa Foy DiGeronimo (2004) document the condition in their aptly-titled *College of the Overwhelmed: The Campus Mental Health Crisis and What to Do About It*. How bad is this situation? An Edison Media Research poll conducted of 2,253 college students aged 18-24 found that four in ten students felt stress "often," and nearly one in five say they feel stressed "all or most of the time," with seven in ten students attributing their stress to "school work and grades" (MSNBC.com, 2008, n.p.a.). In *The Overachievers*, Alexandra Robbins (2006) echoes Strauss

and Howe's emphasis on Millennial pressure: "Anxiety is the most common cause of childhood psychological distress in North America," she writes. "Among teens, studies have shown a strong link between stress and depression, often based on the pressure to succeed" (p. 358).

How, then, can instructors helpfully address the burgeoning problem of academic stress? We offer here three "good-practice" suggestions.

Decrease the Amount of Content in General Education Courses

"Teach less" is a controversial maxim, but also one with a long history in pedagogical theory and practice.[15] Because many undergraduate curricula formerly aimed at providing sequential mastery of "basic knowledge" in order to make upper-level courses truly advanced, decreasing content was pretty much unthinkable. However, the diminishing centrality of both "the canon" and the ideal of the generally educated citizen has served to make most classes *sui generis* (Bauerlein, pp. 219-223). It is thus possible to abbreviate content and not disadvantage one's colleagues. Moreover, confronted by students both empowered and befuddled by the "digital tsunami," many instructors feel that content-mastery is less crucial than thoughtful processing and critical analysis. Finally, because traditional literacy is declining in the U.S., teachers cannot assume that their reading assignments have been completed—or if completed, then comprehended. A recent study found that "more than 75 percent of students at 2-year colleges and more than 50 percent of students at 4-year colleges do not score at the proficient level of literacy" (American Institutes for Research, 2006, n.p.a.).

In view of these developments, we suggest that in subject areas where it can be done in a professionally ethical yet intellectually rigorous fashion, teachers should truncate both reading content and "coverage" expectations in favor of deeper exploration of materials. We have done so in some of our own classes—including our team-taught "Post-Modern Futures"—and found

that smaller packages of material, especially when parsed in break-out sessions, make for more engaged students and deeper discussion. Many of our colleagues are trading-off in this way and finding it has a "de-stressing" effect on their Millennial students. Close reading, especially when demonstrated in advance via digests, *précis*, key-sentence extractions, or critical summaries, can provide spurs to disciplined reading in doable units. Offering students plentiful examples of such good summary work communicates not only the exacting nature of the activity but also the kind of expectations they will confront throughout the semester.

Use Modules, Flexible Deadlines, Pre-planned Workload Reductions and Grade-checking Mechanisms

Many courses are ideally suited for the presentation of material in modular formats. In an African Culture class, we have built an introductory geography module, making use of Google Earth and online interactive map exercises. The unit culminates in a test which registers a *provisional* grade that students can either "lock-in" or improve at the time of the final. Modules like these have the effect of breaking a course into manageable units; the resulting sacrifice in continuity and cumulative impact is, we believe, worth the "peace-of-mind dividend" for Millennial students that comes with such structuring.

Modularized courses also address a Millennial characteristic not highlighted by Strauss and Howe—their distractability. A 2003 study noted that 7.8% of all U.S. children aged 4-17 had received an ADHD diagnosis (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2005). Whether *accurately diagnosed* attention-deficient students are coming to college in greater numbers is a matter of debate. Numerous commentators have linked this condition to the media-saturated world of the Millennial student.[16] Unquestionably, however, many of our students self-identify as having attention problems and are taking ADHD medications. Modular approaches—which shorten and neatly frame educational experiences—offer real help to such students. The

danger, of course, is that modules will not be re-integrated into an effectively continuous learning experience, one that can be solidified through a comprehensive final or project. One good way to handle this problem is to "front-load" a course heavily with modularized material and then end the class two or three weeks early to allow for extensive *but relaxed* pre-exam review.

Teachers might also consider a *pre–planned* mid-semester reduction in class workload. Although many faculty are rightfully skeptical about the amount of work actually being done by a generation of students who seem to have abandoned all but compulsory read-ing, we think it important to at least *appear* to address Millennial perceptions of being overworked. In any case, teachers may find it useful to revisit an old peda-gogical tactic and offer some version of a load-reduction as a morale booster. Here, of course, a balance must be struck between the "sudden" elimination of long-announced assignments and the general Millennial preference for structure and stability. Further, some students feel that their best work is done in extended projects with significant writing. Once again, it may be wise to allow for a choice in the way the semester's work will be concluded.

Their high-achieving attitudes make Millennials intensely interested in their grades. "Kids are fearful of grades and fearful of failing—because the stakes seem higher than before," write Strauss and Howe (2000, p. 161). They report that "Four times as many high school students worry about getting good grades than about pressures to have sex or take drugs . . . ." (Strauss, Howe, & Markiewicz, 2006, p. 199). Millennial students want to know how their grades stand throughout the semes-ter and are accustomed to this sort of frequent feedback in most of the other aspects of their lives. Just as ATM receipts help students avoid overdrafts, any system that can provide them with ongoing grade information is cherished. We have found that Millennial students are very interested in—indeed, insistent on—having a

transparent grade-checking system that is continually updated. This is probably best done with some sort of online grading system that is available to students both easily and privately.

Develop Course Elements that Either Mimic the Structure of Video Games or Include Actual Gaming Exercises

In *Millennials and the Pop Culture: Strategies for a New Generation of Consumers in Music, Movies, Television, the Internet, and Video Games,* Strauss, Howe, and Markiewicz (2006) argue that among the major forms of pop culture, video games are "the most [statistically] dominated by Millennial consumers" (p. 113). Huge numbers of students use video-games as a form of relaxation. That games can also be a significant *low-stress* means of providing serious education is one of the signal discoveries of our time.[17] What makes video games, which at their best efface the distinction between *recreation* and *creation*, so promising?

In *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (2005), Steven Johnson claims that pop media culture is not degrading our intellectual abilities but rather training upcoming generations to think in more cognitively complex ways. Regarding games, Johnson argues that by forcing gamers to manage long-, mid-, and short-term objectives, gaming instructs users in how to construct proper hierarchies of tasks and move through them in the correct sequence—discerning relationships and determining priorities. In video games, accomplishing tasks usually results in perceptible rewards. Video gam-ing, in Johnson's view, "tap[s] into the brain's natural reward circuitry, the dopamine system that drives the brain's 'seeking' circuitry and propels us to seek out new avenues for reward in our environment" (p. 34). Millennial gamers have been "trained" to prefer quick feedback and reward and in fact are "eager to soak up information when it is delivered to them in game form" (pp. 32-62). In terms of cognitive complexity, Johnson argues, it is not "*what* you're thinking about when you're

playing a game [i.e. content], it's *the way* you're thinking that matters [i.e. process]" (p. 40).[18]

An argument can be made, then, that utilizing various forms of this feedback-reward system in a similar cognitive process may be pedagogically useful. Johnson's work allows us to imagine educational experiences which combine pleasure/relaxation with intense learning—something that "literary" reading once did for a larger percentage of the American population—without at the same time reducing the central role of reading in the educational process.[19]

While the challenge of implementing this idea effectively is obvious, it does in fact coincide with the ideas of other teaching theorists, both on and offline, who recommend giving students continuing rather than infrequent feedback. "As the instructor, be a model of good participation by logging on frequently and contributing to the discussion," advise Paloff and Pratt (2001, p. 30). Like computer and video games themselves, online classes have a technological advantage here, since "Computer-mediated communication provides considerable avenues for prompt and reflective feedback" (Van Keuren, 2006, p. 5).

Foreground and Background Ethics

A note on (almost everyone's) moral confusion. In his fiercely-admired and debated *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981, 1984), Alasdair Macintyre claimed that at present "the language of morality" is in a "state of grave disorder" such that what we have are "simulacra of morality," whose sources and import we simply don't understand (p. 2). While Macintyre's Aristotelian emphasis on the recovery of the classical virtues may not have won the day, few disagree that something like the problem he identified is a real feature of the present age. Interestingly, the controversy aroused by Macintyre's work coincided exactly with the arrival of the Millennials. Their significant ethical struggles—especially poignant as they confront the question of abortion—bear out the validity of his diagnosis. In

recognizing that they inherit moral confusion from the wider culture, one is less tempted to engage in intergenerational blaming.

Given this surrounding cultural reality, ethical reflection must be a prominent feature of classes. But where does one begin? In general terms, it seems clear that seems clear that being special, confident, and ambitious are qualities that can easily move towards excessive competitiveness, self-absorption and even narcissism. Strauss, Howe, and Markiewicz's language is revealing: "Far more than Gen Xers, and differently than Boomers at the same age, Millennials have a high regard for themselves, not just as individuals, but also *as a group.* Wherever they are—college, high school, sports team, theater group, student government, clubs—they are more inclined to think of anything done by their youth peers as competent, effective, and promising" (2006, p. 123). This inward, present-oriented, "tribal" focus can diminish regard for received canons of behavior and weaken restraints in a variety of ethical domains. As Patricia Hersch (1998) chillingly shows in *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence,* this inward, present-oriented, youth-centric focus can diminish regard for received canons of behavior and weaken restraints in a variety of ethical domains. When coupled with the cultural relativism and egocentrism that are the birthright of young students everywhere, such self- and group- esteem can powerfully separate our pupils from their consciences. We believe that these issues should be raised and discussed frequently in classes (here online contexts may even be better places to do this well since they can offer a less confrontational means of debate).

Effort versus excellence: The grading issue. Our foremost concerns are "work-ethics," the battle against cheating, and basic civility. The first of these turns out to be the problem of "entitlement," the negative face of "specialness." The movement in American education toward excellence through measurable results has been

a prominent feature of our students' upbringing. As Strauss and Howe put it glowingly, "With accountability and higher school standards rising to the very top of America's political agenda, Millennials are on track to become the best-educated and best-behaved adults in the nation's history" (2000, p. 44). One might therefore conclude that—with their better-honed sense of what an outstanding educational product looks like—our students would be tough judges of their work, eager to receive criticism, and modest in their expectations of reward. However, a sizable (and vocal) percentage of our students exhibit attitudes that run entirely in the opposite direction. Too often, they overestimate the value of their efforts and clamor for grades that should go only to the very best. Their generation's achievement orientation thus appears to have trumped other, better traits—such as self-knowledge and intellectual modesty.

The practical meaning of this loss of perspective is that is that teachers must use their powerful resources to exhibit *actual excellence*. This might be something as simple as a discussion of several model papers along with interpolated instructor comments and plaudits. Certainly an early and careful class discussion about "work" must take place, one that centers on the fact that hard work by itself, in the absence of skill and ability, does not always guarantee high grades. It will also make the critical distinction between "self-worth" (in Kantian terms, an inherent property of all persons) and "self-esteem," to which only those who have accomplished difficult things are entitled.

Although it is also a topic which students may resist, the related issue of grade inflation can be incorporated into any classroom discussion, especially as it is so closely connected to the idea of Millennial notions of self-esteem. We recommend that this ethical issue be regularly discussed with the students themselves, rather than simply being covered by a note in the syllabus. One might begin with a look at Princeton University's

attempt to control grade inflation by imposing a quota on the number of A's given in any class. If time allows, one might ask a class to research grade inflation at their own institution to illustrate the pervasiveness of the issue. In the end, the problem of grade inflation is the creation of entire departments, colleges, and universities, rather than individual instructors. Students, we hold, have a right to understand the pressures that look-the-other-way policies exert on (especially) untenured professors and teaching assistants. Only then will they grasp what it means to expect top grades in all their classes.

Counteracting the cheating culture. In an informal experiment to gauge the amount of cheating in our classroom, we offered a single version of the mid-term exam in a traditional class, but then, when finals arrived, offered multiple versions of the final exam. Interestingly, we discovered that for a number of students, scores mysteriously dropped by 30 or more points. Although Howe and Strauss (2000) argue that Millennials are strongly inclined to follow conventional authority and rules, we have seen that countervailing pressures and trends move them in a more Darwinian direction. Referring the Millennials as "Generation Me," Jean Twenge observes that "in an increasingly competitive world, the temptation to cheat will be ever stronger" for teens and young adults, who are now "resigned to cheating among their peers" (2006, 27-28).

More dramatically, David Callahan argues that dishonesty has become endemic in our culture. In his 2004 *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*, Callahan cites large-scale national surveys which indicate that "the number of students admitting that they cheated on an exam at least once in the previous year jumped from 61 percent in 1992 to 74 percent in 2002" (p. 203). Nearly 40 percent of 12,000 college students surveyed in 2002 "admitted that they were willing to lie or cheat to get into college" (pp. 203-4).

In a hybrid on-and-offline course, we have addressed the problem of cheating by giving randomized exams in a face-to-face setting. We have also performed pre-assignment "topic checks," doing Internet searches for canned papers in given subjects and thereby ruling out in advance frequently plagiarized subjects. A non-exam-based pedagogy or a larger set of randomized exam questions and a precise time slot for the exam may offer the best methods of discouraging student cheating or undesired collaboration. While the range of anti-cheating strategies is wide, in the end it is the conversation about cheating that counts. Here we recommend the general approach taken by Macintyre and his followers: drawing attention to the nature of the practice in question. Plagiarism, for example, isn't primarily a problem of rule-breaking; rather, falsification of authorship and the failure to do one's own research undermine the academic enterprise itself.

The wider meaning of "netiquette." A singular benefit of online instruction is the now-decades long evolution of norms that allow the Internet to perform its work well. Because this medium, despite its democratizing potential, offers so many possibilities for doing damage to others, an ethic has developed spontaneously to guide users in their online behavior. While "netiquette" has not yet been widely adopted, its existence is powerfully significant, especially for a generation that has come of age in an era of text-messaging, email, and Facebook friends and enemies.

We are particularly attracted to those aspects of netiquette that delineate an ethos of civility, both online and in face-to-face educational settings. Self-restrictions in the areas of profanity, "flaming," and privacy protection strike us as particularly important. In our online class experiences, more than one student has balked at posting in a small-group forum where they felt they were being unfairly critiqued by other group posters. Bringing such cases (anonymously) to the attention of the whole class and allowing students to discuss them

engages them in a crucial debate that promises important behavioral changes. This is doing-ethics-without-mentioning-it—a vital activity for a generation often cynical about the sort of virtue-of-the-week character-education programs frequently offered in the public schools.[20]

Conclusion

In closing, we recognize that other generational models are available. Twenge's work *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—And More Miserable Than Ever Before* (2006) dissents from Strauss and Howe (2000) and enjoys a wide following. As her title indicates, she is as pessimistic as they are cheerful. Twenge's forthcoming book will focus on the phenomenon of generational narcissism. Other recent works reflect Twenge's pessimistic mood. Besides Bauerlein's *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future*, there is Nicholas Carr's *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google* (2008). Maggie Jackson's *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (2008) adds to this stream, as does Susan Jacoby's trenchant *The Age of American Unreason* (2008). A range of different insights and strategies would doubtlessly arise from these different interpretations of generational trends. In this study, we have combined Strauss and Howe's (2000) dominant paradigm with our own classroom observations, while including some elements from these other works as they apply to practical pedagogy. We do not want to imply that Millennial preferences or traits should be the only, or even the primary, driving engine behind pedagogical strategies. But we are suggesting that readers *consider* accounts of those who have been studying the Millennial generation *as* a generation, contemplate our own suggestions for teaching strategies, and evaluate both in terms of their own experiences with Millennial students.

Beyond the realm of everyday practice, there may

be an additional value in studying these generation-based analyses. A 2006 *EdTech* article by John O'Brien notes, "within the next four years, the oldest Millennials will turn 30," and this at a time when "the median age of those receiving a doctorate is 33" (n.p.a.). Thus, today's Millennial students—whether possessed of greatness, distracted, narcissistic, or none-of-the-above—will shortly be tomorrow's colleagues in the teaching profession itself. ▪▪

Notes

1   For those who sought higher education, the first edge of the Millennial wave has now either left or completed college or entered graduate school.

2   Theories about generational patterns of succession within national cultures are not new. Like most scholars in this field, Strauss and Howe acknowledge their debt to Karl Mannheim; the latter's essay "The Problem of Generations" (1928) may be said to have launched generational studies. Older scholars will recall Lewis S. Feuer's controversial 1969 generational study which interpreted the upheavals in the university as an explosion of anger between sons and fathers, a view which seemed to many commentators to diminish the significance of the Student Left. Significantly, Mannheim and Feuer began as Marxists, inclining them to look for large evolutionary patterns in social history. See Feuer's *The Conflict Of Generations: The Character and Significance Of Student Movements* (NY, Basic Books 1969). (Especially helpful here is Jane Pilcher, "Mannheim's Sociology of Generations: An Undervalued Legacy," *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 45, No. 3 [September, 1994], pp. 481-495.)

3   In our view, the idealization of the GI Generation is a trend whose depth and persistence betrays not only nostalgia but a hard-to-describe cultural unease about the present. Tom Brokaw's still- popular *The Greatest Generation* (NY: Random House, 1998) has been followed by the Stephen Ambrose-inspired mini-series "Band of Brothers" (2001) and Ken Burns and Lynn Novack's (2007) PBS series "The War." Clint Eastwood's "Flags of Our Fathers" and "Letters from Iwo Jima" (2006) swell this tide. Commercial motives aside, these productions seem curiously ill-timed, as if oblivious to the on-going wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

4   In later works by these authors, Neil Howe's name appears before that of William Strauss. For clarity's sake we will use "Strauss and Howe" throughout this article. Note: William Strauss died unexpectedly in December of 2007.

5   Generational studies, despite their current popularity, may in fact be ill-suited to the immigrant/native/racially-diverse hybrid societies of the New World. Much as they try, Strauss and Howe cannot really incorporate the outlooks of ex-slaves, immigrants, sequestered religious societies, or the poor into their multi-generational analysis. Until quite recently, these groups exhibited *their own patterns of generational succession*, patterns that were far stronger than the "larger" national ones. For example, Strauss and Howe consider Americans born between 1925 and 1942 as members of the same "Silent Generation" that so concerned William H. Whyte in the *The Organizational Man* (1956). Yet in terms of African American history, the late 1950's and early 60's were the heroic time of the Civil Rights Movement.

Interestingly, a key Millennial trait may be that of an embracing of group-diversity that goes far beyond "tolerance." Strauss and Howe note that "demographically, this is America's most racially and ethnically diverse, and least-Caucasian, generation," with non-whites accounting for "nearly 36% of the 18-or-under population" in 1999. They argue that their generational scheme also applies to this group because "nonwhite Millennials are. . . . in some ways *the most important* contributors" to the Millennial personality (2000, pp. 15-16).

6   Current statistics vary, in part according to the cut-off date chosen for the Millennial generation, but almost all agree that there are at least 75 million Americans in this generational category.

7   "Next was spending time with friends, followed by time with a significant other. . . . [A]lost no one said 'money' when asked what makes them happy." They also find that, overwhelmingly, "young people think marriage would make them happy and want to be married some day" (Noveck & Tompson, 2007).

8   Significant racial and ethnic differences turned up in this study: only 56% of black people responded positively to the question, while 51% of Hispanics were "happy with life in general." (Noveck & Tompson, 2007) Such an enormous disparity underscores the dissatisfaction with Strauss and Howe expressed earlier in this article.

9   Here sociologist Tim Clydesdale echoes the views of Strauss and Howe. Most college freshmen are simply not interested in intellectual liberation or the widening of cultural horizons. They view post-high school education "instrumentally—as a pathway to a better job and economic security—with most teens accepting their educational hazing and orienting their attention to more immediate matters." *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press), p. 3.

10   Out of our survey of 74 Millennial-age students, 19 felt that "the emphasis on youth safety" during their lives had been "too over-emphasized," 49 felt that it had been "about the right amount," and 6 "not emphasized enough."

11   A useful address for Google Documents is http://www.google.com/educators/p_docs.html

12   Australian academics Len and Heather Sparrow and Paul Swan offer (in addition to a marvelous collaborative name) a useful reference in their article

"Student-Centred Learning: Is It Possible?" (2000).

13   Joseph J. Gonzalez, "How Good Scholarship Makes Good Citizens," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 19, 2008).

14   Both an admirer and strong critic of Strauss and Howe, Mark Bauerlein has recently argued that their headlong involvement in the new digital culture—often lauded by educators and parents—leaves college-bound young adults wholly unprepared for what is to come. "The founts of knowledge are everywhere, but the rising generation is camped in the desert, passing stories, pictures, tunes, and texts back and forth, living off the thrill of peer attention," he writes. "Meanwhile, their intellects refuse the cultural and civic inheritance that has made us what we are up to now." Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* (NY: Penguin, 2008), p. 10.

15   Both the Harvard Red Book (1946) and the St. John's Great Books system represented a tremendous commitment to content mastery of a large number of classic texts, even though the former curricular philosophy was shaped by the perceived new challenges of mass education and the Cold War. The abandonment of the Red Book at Harvard has produced one of the most important intramural debates about specific content mastery in recent American educational history. Indispensible here for historical backgrounds is Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989). See, especially pp. 167-173.

16   Here we strongly recommend Mark Bauerlein's third chapter, "Screen Time." Bauerlein's account extends a line of criticism that began with Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman. Sven Birkerts' *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (NY: Fawcett Columbine, 1994) finds much confirmation in the very

recent studies Bauerlein relies on.

17   The 2008 UNC Teaching and Learning with Technology Conference in Raleigh, NC, at which we presented a previous version of this article, also included two presentations specifically about adapting videogame concepts to education.

18   As might be expected, Mark Bauerlein includes a lengthy critique of Steven Johnson's work in *The Dumbest Generation*. See pp. 87-91.

19   According to *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in* America, in 1982, the percentage of 18-24 year old Americans reading literature was 59.8%; by 2002, that percentage had dropped to 42.8% (Washington: National Endowment for the Arts, 2004).

20   In our home state of North Carolina, "in the fall of 2001, the Student Citizen Act of 2001 (SL 2001-363) was passed into law by the North Carolina State Legislature. This Act requires every local board of education to develop and implement character education instruction with input from the local community." Retrieved September 6, 2008 from: http://www.ncpublicschools.org/charactereducation/

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