Preparing Millennial Designers for Professional Practice

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Abstract: The Baby Boomers, born 1946–1964, were the first to be coined a "Me" generation, with a strong focus on themselves. They were the first generation to explore introspection, self-focus and individualism as young adults. However, the students currently filling college classrooms across the nation are the *new* "Me" generation. This generation, commonly referred to as The Millenials, was born between 1981–1999. They are often described as selfish, rude, and spoiled and have been labeled the most self-centered generation to date. However, these traits are a reflection of the society in which they have been raised. The Millenials have been raised in a society where reliable birth control, legalized abortion and parenthood as a choice, created a generation of the "most wanted children" in American history. The Millenials have been raised to put themselves first. Each has been told they were each special by parents, television, movies and even school programs (Twenge, 2006, p. 6).

How do we teach a generation taught to think of themselves first to become design professionals — where audience should be placed first? Not only are graphic design students entering a profession whose success relies on the ability to communicate with a range of audiences, they are entering one of the most challenging job markets in the history of our profession. As the latest "Me" peer group enters the workforce, an understanding of generational differences, bridging techniques and educational approaches are imperative for their success.

While Baby Boomers and Millenials have both been labeled a "Me" generation, in reality they are far apart in their worldviews. When these generations meet in the workplace, "clashpoints"™ occur (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 20). This paper and presentation will survey generational research, explain how this research may inform curriculum and detail how programs can produce graduates well suited for professional practice in a multi-generation workplace.

Key words: Millennials, graphic design pedagogy, generational research

Part of our development as individuals is due to the culture we experience during our formative years. This concept is the basis for generational research. Generational research shows what people from certain generations are like on average, but is not meant to stereotype the generations. This type of research shows strong consistencies of the whole, but of course there will always be exceptions to the rule.

The generation currently populating college classrooms is called the Net Generation, or Millennials. This generation is broadly defined as those born in the 70s, 80s and 1990s. Some narrow it to those born between 1981 and 1999. If one were to assume that the Millennial generation — like the famously-large Baby Boomer generation — encompasses everyone born over an 18 year span, the two generations would be about equal in size (77 million) (Taylor & Keeter, 2010, p. 16).

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The size of Baby Boomer and Millenial generations is not the only thing they have in common. Both were christened as the new "Me" generation at their inception. The Baby Boomers in the United States are typically categorized as those who were born between 1946 and 1964. This puts the typical boomer between 47 and 65 years old in 2012. There are about 75 million boomers in the U.S.; representing about 29% of the U.S. population. The 1960s is typically attributed as the decade that defined the boomers. The music, events, and the social changes made a permanent impression on many boomers. However, there were so many changes in the sixties that how old an individual was during the decade greatly affected their worldview. This generation is often labeled the first "Me Generation". Trendy pursuits of self-fulfillment, feminism and railing against conformity were defining cultural hallmarks that evolved while many "Me Generation" Boomers were adolescents or young adults (Twenge, 2006, p. 7).

However, many argue the Millennials are the true "Me" generation. As a group of people born after the concept of "self-focus" entered the cultural mainstream, this generation has never known a world that put duty before self. Reliable birth control, legalized abortion and a shift toward parenthood as a choice rather than obligation make this generation the most "wanted" generation of children in American history (Twenge, 2006, pp. 4–5).

Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D. explores the Millennial generation in detail in her book, *Generation Me*. This book presents the results of twelve studies on generational differences, based on data from 1.3 million young Americans. During her doctorate research at the University of Michigan, Twenge discovered this data by reviewing questionnaires that measure personality traits and attitudes. These questionnaires had been used thousands of times since the 1950's, 1960s and 1970s, and most people who filled them out were college students and school children. Because the questions had not changed on the questionnaires, she has been able to compare scores and see exactly how young people's personalities and attitudes have changed. Her book is unique because it summarizes large amounts of psychological data collected at specific times — across generations.

Many psychologists have begun researching and trying to understand this generation. The fore mentioned Jean M. Twenge, Ph. D. is one of the leading researchers in this area. Through studies and ensuing research, Twenge has begun to discover the trends, personalities and perspectives that are common to the most recent "Me" generation. Twenge's research has shown the Millenials' world-views have drastically been shaped by being told they were special from childhood through television, movies, and school programs. The focus on "self" is different from the viewpoints of past generations. Boomers focused on introspection and self-absorption. Millennials are not self-absorbed, but rather self-important. It is taken for granted they are independent, special individuals so they need not really think about it (Twenge, 2006, p. 4).

This is not the same, Dr. Twenge clarifies, as saying they are spoiled — that would imply they always receive what they want. Although some parents are too indulgent, many in this generation must overcome difficult challenges their elders never had to face. While families could achieve middle-class status on the earnings of one high school-educated person, it now takes two college-educated earners to achieve the same standard of living. Many teens feel the world demands perfection in everything and are cracking under the pressure. Twenge also clarifies this generation is not selfish. Youth volunteering has risen in the last decade. This generation finds fulfillment in helping others — as long as it does not conflict with their own goals. They want to make a difference, but they want to do it in their own way. They believe people should follow their dreams and not be held back by societal expectations.

The challenging perspectives and world-views of this generation are not their "fault". Instead, young people

of today should be seen as products of their culture — a culture that teaches them primacy of the individual at virtually every step — and it's a culture that was in place before they were even born. Asking students of today to adopt personalities and attitudes of a previous time is like asking an adult American to instantly become a nationality completely foreign to them. It simply does not work. Morris Massey, a popular researcher and speaker on generations, put it this way. "The gut-level value systems are, in fact, dramatically different between the generations… The focus should not be so much on how to change other people to conform to our standards, our values. But rather we must learn how to accept and understand other people in their own right, acknowledging the validity of their values, their behavior." As Massey points out and research supports, our value systems are set in childhood and don't change much thereafter (Twenge, 2006, p. 8).

It is important to note there are differing views from Twenge's on this generation. In Neil Howe and William Strauss's book, *Millennials Rising*, they believe those born since 1982 will usher in a return to duty, civic responsibility and teamwork. They feel this generation will resemble the generation who won World War II. However, this team's theories are based on qualitative data and do not have the quantitative data to back up their perspective. Instead Twenge's quantitative data has found, through personality tests, today's young people have been consistently taught to put their own needs first and to focus on feeling good about themselves. This is not an attitude conducive to following social rules or favoring the group's needs over the individuals as Howe and Strauss propose. They also argue today's young people are optimistic. This is true for children and adolescents who have absorbed the cheerful aphorisms so common today ("You can be anything you want to be"). However their childhood's of constant praise, self-esteem boosting and unrealistic expectations does not prepare them for an increasingly competitive workplace and the current economic squeeze.

Twenge describes this situation as "Adulthood Shock". After a childhood of buoyancy, Millennials are working harder to get less. This generation enters a world in which finding and keeping jobs is a challenge, basic necessities such as housing and health care are exorbitant. The reality of adulthood shock is the scene we are beginning to see play out in today's college classrooms.

So what is an instructor to do? The first step is to try and understand the Millennial audience in our classroom. They have a different outlook on life because the times that shaped their generation are very different from older generations. They can't be blamed for absorbing the culture around them. Their attitudes are not wrong — just different. Trying to understand their worldview will help any instructor connect more readily with "Gen Me" students. To help this effort, consider how old your students were on *9/11*. While many of us can remember where we were and what we were doing when we heard of the first plane hitting the World Trade Center, many of our students cannot — because they were still children at only 11 years old.

The strong sense of entitlement we are beginning to see in our students is a natural outcome of the self-esteem movement. And it has been acquired through 18 years of upbringing. We cannot change this, but we can understand this means we will have to be prepared to explain very clearly that success and privileges will not happen overnight. Many employers express frustration with the high expectations new "Gen Me" employees have for salaries and promotions.

High expectations, combined with an increasingly competitive world, lead to a darker side of this generation's mindset. Millennials often blame other people for their problems and can quickly sink into anxiety and depression. With college and work getting more competitive, the trend toward externality (believing things are out of your control) is likely to progress. Psychologists researching externality have definitively found people who believe that outside forces determine their fate are more likely to be depressed and anxious and cope poorly

with stress (Twenge, 2006, p. 9). One way to allow students greater feelings of control in design projects is providing a framework to work within, while also opening up project parameters and allowing them to establish their own interim deadlines while working within a larger framework. Creating projects in which students help define the visual problem to address begins to confront the externality commonly seen in Millennials, and also provides opportunity for more rigorous thought and concept development.

As instructors of Millennials, we can begin to play a role in better preparing them for the reality of life. Introducing them to the idea of perseverance, and that rewards are not immediate will help them succeed in the workplace and as designers. This can been seen in the reluctance of design students to invest in solid process work for their projects. Building a series of checks and balances into the process work helps them learn the perseverance and self-control needed to create fully developed, thought-out design solutions.

Students in today's classrooms have the liberty of exploring the possibilities for a design much more quickly because of technology, but they do not have it easy. Before you become frustrated with them, consider the economy they will be entering. This is a generation that has been praised and had their expectations built up, only to be faced with some very harsh realities upon entering adulthood. Full-time employment among 18-to-29-year-olds has dropped significantly in the past four years while remaining largely unchanged for older working-age adults. According to Pew Research Center surveys, the share of 18-to-29-year-olds employed full time has declined 9 percentage points from 2006 to 2010. In comparison, full-time employees make up about the same proportion of 30-to-45-year-olds (63% in 2006 and 65% in the latest survey) and 46-to-64-year-olds (53% in 2006 and 54% today) (Taylor & Keeter, 2010, p. 45).

With the economic challenges Millenials are facing, we might look at our curriculum and consider how we might best prepare them for professional practice. We need to teach students about career paths in design at an earlier level. The field of design is changing dramatically and our students are approaching it with great anxiety. The earlier we can begin to educate them regarding their opportunities, students can get help to develop an education plan that will help them achieve their career goals. Job placement offices and college career services can only spend so much time with students. Sophomore level vocation courses should cover career opportunities, graduate schools and job search skills. Ideally these classes would feature guest appearances by professionals and mentors in an established mentoring program. This would help ease anxiety caused by high expectations while aiding students to develop more realistic views of professional practice.

The introduction of research methods to the design process, specifically methods that help students connect to their audience in an empathetic manner will also benefit this generation. Ethnographic research practices introduced as methodology for design projects are one possibility. This method of research, borrowed from anthropology, creates a greater focus on audience, introduces more rigorous research methods, and focuses design students on empathetic solutions that communicate more effectively with their audience. Ethnographic research focuses on the link between human behavior and culture. Ethnographers strive to understand and separate the emic perspective from the etic perspective. Emic investigations define cultural phenomena through the perspective of the community under study. Etic investigations define cultural phenomena from the perspective of an individual who is not under study. Ethnographic researchers focus their efforts on understanding the internal, or emic, perspective of the community, using etic perspectives to augment the data gathered by an emic study (O'grady, 2009, p. 26). Other important aspects of ethnographic research involve how the research is conducted. Observation is conducted in the demographics' natural environment. Subjects are not removed or isolated to a clinical environment for observation. This is key to developing an empathetic understanding of the group under

study. Introducing research methods such as these help students develop a deeper understanding of their audience.

"Clashpoint" ™ is a term coined by Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman in their book *When Generations Collide*. Their book focuses on the interaction of generations in the workplace. They define a clashpoints as the collision that arises when two generations bump headlong into each other. Raised by highly communicative, participation-oriented parents, the Millenials have been included in major family decisions since they were old enough to point. From deciding where to go on family vacations to which computer to buy, Millenials have always been a part of the day-to-day negotiations of their home lives. They'll bring this quality with them when they show up to the college classroom or workplace. This means they will not dutifully follow instruction, but it also means they'll be able to contribute and collaborate right from the start. This is counterintuitive to the Baby Boomer perspective of following the chains of command and putting your time in before being able to voice your opinion (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 31). If these two generations do not have an understanding of one another a clashpoint will quickly develop in workplace scenarios.

Another clashpoint for the Boomers and Millenials is different perspectives on careers. Baby Boomers are currently moving into the final phases of their careers before retirement, but are still looking to build a stellar career — as the generation who has always wanted to excel in their careers. They are realizing they have a limited amount of time left to excel and to earn at peak capacity and they are going to want to make the most of these remaining career years. This is a generation who loves to be challenged, but are increasingly moving towards a more contemplative life stage. While the Baby Boomer is focused on building a "stellar career", the contrasting career path of the Millennials is a "parallel career" path. Millenials' programmed lives have made them familiar with multitasking. Millenials are capable of learning several job simultaneously and performing all of them well. In a tight labor market, making sure Millenial designers can cover more than one position is a smart strategy. Some researchers even project Millennials may have more than 10 career paths in their lifetimes — not job changes, but career changes! This means they will recycle their skills and talents and personal preferences into new applications again and again. Throughout their careers, this generation will be ready, willing and able to adapt to an organization's evolving structure. They are ready and willing as long as organizations — be it corporate or universities — understand this generation and more importantly what motivates them. Motivation for the Millenials include: a fun environment, the ability to work in teams with peers, bosses and decision makers they can relate to, and being allowed to participate in decisions. And most importantly if you can clearly explain and prove what you are asking them to do will add a skill or experience to an already crowded resume it will be seen as an excellent reward. Don't forget, they've been coached since pre-school by their Baby Boomer parents to create a resume that will outshine their seventy-seven million cohorts to get into the best schools or land the best jobs (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 65).

Finding common ground and connecting with members of our own generation is relatively easy. Having lived through the same formative points of reference, we tend to share a feeling of connectedness. But with members of another generation, connecting can be much more difficult. The same factors that bind one generation drive another apart. As we move forward, "Generation Me" is moving beyond our classrooms and into the workforce. Understanding and adapting to this generation's world-view and their own way of working is becoming more than a good idea — it is becoming essential to the viability and prosperity of our society. Understanding the Millennial generation's perspective and knowing what motivates them are key to their success and ours in the design classroom studio and professional practice.

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