



INSTRUCT-O-GRAM

Instructing Mixed Generations

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KEY: INSTRUCTIONAL DEVELOPMENT; GENERATIONS

INTRODUCTION

“Strength lies in differences, not in similarities” — Stephen R. Covey

The modern classroom is a complex, complicated (1), dynamic environment that requires an intentional, conscientious, and skilled touch to navigate. One of the many factors that all instructors must account for is the generational bandwidth of their student body.

Taking the Conversation Deeper

When asked about the generational gap, most instructors respond with a pithy colloquialism, something along the lines of “millennials are entitled, older generations are bad with computers”. These vague generalizations are harmful to the conversation and don’t capture the *complex* nature of the challenges faced in the multi-generational classroom.

While it’s important to understand all generational learning tendencies, the focus of this conversation is the most common situation and class makeup that instructors are experiencing presently, which is a generation X or early generation Y instructor teaching a mixed student body.

In both workforces and classrooms, millennials do and will increasingly dominate the field, necessitating that the fire service quickly adapts to a different kind of recruit. While there are many outliers and pockets of exception, and the numbers are widely variable in a rapidly changing landscape, the general trend is that workforces (and therefore classrooms) are made up of about 40% generation Y and beyond, 40% generation X, 19% baby boomer, and 1% traditionalist. As we move forward, we can expect generations Y and Z to be the increasing majority of our recruits and students (2).

As the gen x/gen y/gen z tension is the most pressing challenge in the present-day classroom, we’ll focus on those interactions in this article.

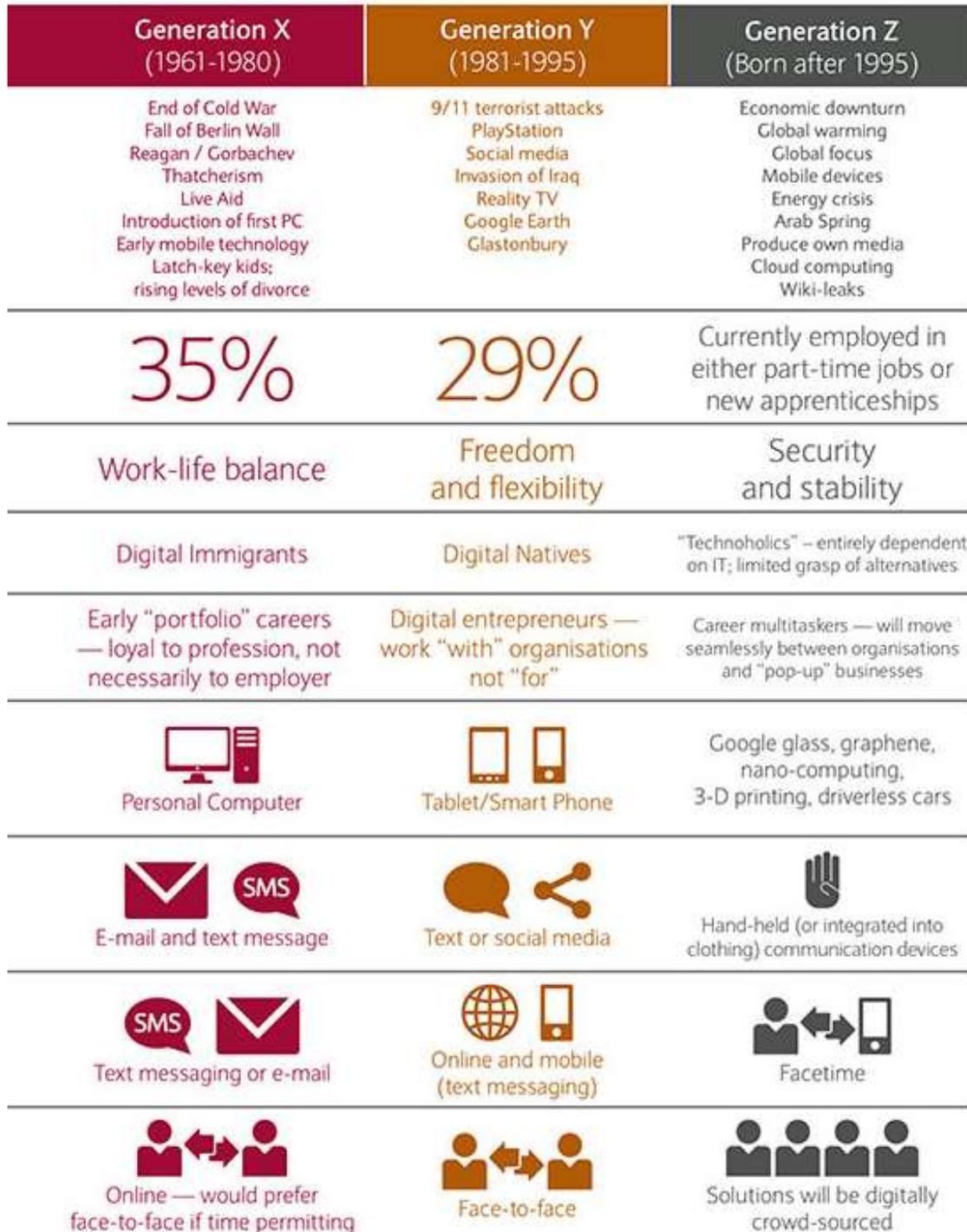
Why bother? Two reasons:

1. **Survival**; organizations that wish to survive must maintain a high degree of diversity and adaptation (3). Failure to expand cultural intelligence (4) and embrace diverse perspective is a well proven death sentence to organizations and industries (5).
2. **Efficacy**; well leveraged diversity is remarkably effective, both instructionally and in management. Instructors that tap into generational learning needs typically experience tremendous

success with their students. Seth Godin said “Yes, it's true that your hammer has a wooden handle. But throwing it in the fireplace to get a few BTUs out of it is a huge waste...”

First, let’s create a general understanding of generational boundaries with Figure 1 (6). Remember, don’t get stuck on specific dates and statistics, instead use this information to establish a context for the conversation.

Figure 1:



Next, it's important to recognize that the fundamental values differences inherent in each generation are the primary driving forces behind their behaviors. This vital paradigm shift transforms perceptions of annoying behaviors into understanding across what are truly different cultures. Recognizing that differing values doesn't make a student less capable allows an instructor to tap into students' potentials.

A major rift commonly found between generation X and generation Y/Z is due to a transition of values. Gen X commonly values loyalty and justice, where gen Y/Z often values equality and personal freedom. Studying Figure 2 (7), you can imagine how friction can develop as these values collide.

Figure 2:

	Loyalty	Equality	Personal Freedom	Justice
Focus	Traditions	Self-expression	Self-Fulfillment	Inner honesty
Outlook	Recognizes authority	Friendly relationships	Personal goals & aspirations	Common good
Goal	Responsible Living	Self assertion & happiness	Self-satisfaction	Acceptance into group
Fear	Disloyalty to beliefs/people	Inner conflict/inequality	Loss of personal well being	Lack of personal harmony
Work Style	Meaningful involvement	Socially acceptable	Self-expressed individuality	Personal involvement

While the generational gap conversation often degrades into a debate about who is better or worse, instructors need to actively transform the conversation into one about how integrating diverse generational values creates a powerfully versatile classroom. Below is a primer on the needs of the two generations we see the most:

- Common Pitfalls:
 - **Drowning in the details;** there are many schools of thought and timelines to define generational boundaries. Focus on the generalities and tools to help bridge the gap rather than debating whether the millennial label starts in the middle or early eighties.
 - **Insisting on stereotype compliance;** there will be outliers in every generation. Context and style of upbringing, experiences, and personality all impact individuals, and not all people within a generation will display all the traits associated with that generation.
 - **Using generational labels as a weapon;** for some, learning more about the generational gap simply provides ammunition for generational warfare within the fire station and classroom. Instead, use this expanded knowledge to drive connection and understanding.
 - **Applying anecdotal data;** some people of every generation are unpleasant to be around. Stop generalizing an entire generation of people because the kid at Starbucks seems entitled. He probably is. That has nothing to do with your firefighter. Stop using your own narrow experience to define a generation.

It's worth saying that this is an expansive topic and a broad conversation, and this is just a primer. As an instructor, it's very much worth your time to explore the references below and learn more about ways to account for generational learning tendencies in your curricula.

Classroom Generational Needs Assessment:

1. Give the following assessment to your class before teaching and make notes of what each students' individual needs are. Don't be surprised if many students have a mix of generational traits.
2. Next, complete the assessment yourself, and reflect on ways that your teaching style supports your generational background.
3. Once you know your students' characteristics, pick three areas of weakness that you'll focus on improving during your next instructional session.

Instructions: Read each statement. If the statement resonates with you, place a checkbox next to it. If not, leave it blank. Beware the desire to check traits that you wish you had, traits you've been told you have, or traits that fit your commonly stereotyped generation. Stick with the statements with which you instinctively identify.

I Am Generation X:

- I'm independent, and I want the opportunity to learn on my own schedule. Create tools that allow me to direct my own learning as many times as I like while I assimilate.
- I need clearly defined, linear progressions of information. I like processes, and I want you to get into the details with me.
- I have experiences from my past. I want you to learn about them and incorporate them into my learning, allowing me to associate the new knowledge with things I already know.
- I have a strong work ethic, and I won't tolerate double standards. I expect my instructors to work as hard as I do.
- I'm skeptical. Make sure you know the information before you try to teach it to me. I have no patience with invented answers to my questions.
- I'm very interested in how the knowledge and skills I'm learning benefit me in the real world. Make sure you establish strong relevance to my specific job function.
- I can be direct to the point of brusqueness. I appreciate clear feedback to help me refine my learning, and can be annoyed by ambiguous or unclear criticism.
- I like to try my hand and have plenty of time to experiment. Give me plenty of time to practice skills in a self-directed manner.
- I probably have a family. Work/life balance is important to me. Show interest in and support my family life when creating schedules and homework.
- I like to pursue goals. Make sure I know the outcome that we're working towards and give me the tools to achieve it.
- I don't automatically respect authority. Instead, I expect you to demonstrate your expertise. Make sure you're prepared when you enter the class room with me.

I Am Generation Y:

- I need autonomy and authority. I want to feel trusted with important work and high stakes. Put me in charge of something that matters. Don't sideline me with busywork.
- I want to identify with the brands I associate with. Create a brand for my workplace/school/class that I can share with my social circle.
- I focus on ability, not seniority. "Wait your turn" education and business politics frustrate and alienate me. Take the time to evaluate my progress and give me the difficult lessons and tasks when I'm ready, not when it's scheduled.
- I'm not afraid of adjusting my plan. When I encounter programs, curricula, and instructors that don't work for me, I'll leave and find something that does, don't take it personally.
- I'm used to rapid processing and chunked information. My brain is wired to evaluate big pictures by mastering isolated snippets of information, and inferring the rest.
- I'm interested in what happens "behind the curtain". Answer my "why" questions, they help me establish relevance for my learning.
- I often focus on mastering myself and my passions early in life, and develop a family later. This means that I will be prepared for mastery level information and practice at a younger age than you expect. Challenge me!
- Leverage my skills. High reliability organization doctrine preaches to "defer to the expert". Sometimes, that's me. Don't discount my knowledge because of my age. Let me teach and apply the things I've mastered.
- I like to have access to all the information, all the time. Give me an on-demand knowledge sharing platform.
- I need the freedom to explore an assigned task. Teach me about outcomes, and coach me on processes. Don't micromanage.
- I value my time. I won't tolerate unprepared instructors or poorly executed learning experiences. Make the training time worth it to me.
- I can adapt on the run and change perspectives quickly. Keep up the tempo so I don't get bored.

Published by Landon A. Churchill: *Landon is a Firefighter/Paramedic with Colorado River Fire Rescue and an EMS Program Coordinator and Adjunct Faculty with Colorado Mountain College. He is heavily involved in local and regional training and education, and owns Big Red Fire Training, an education and instructional consulting company.*

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