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Teaching of Psychology 2013 40: 66

DOI: 10.1177/0098628312465870

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Teaching Generation Me

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Teaching of Psychology
40(1) 66-69
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DOI: 10.1177/0098628312465870
http://top.sagepub.com



Abstract

Today's college students are significantly different from previous generations. On average, they are overconfident, have high expectations, report higher narcissism, are lower in creativity, are less interested in civic issues, and are less inclined to read long passages of text. They are highly confident of their abilities and received higher grades in high school despite doing fewer hours of homework than previous generations. They also believe in equality regardless of ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. Strategies for teaching Generation Me include: frequent and honest feedback on performance; interactive learning; explaining why the material is important; using images and video clips; eliminating makeup exams and exceptions; and shorter textbooks. Teachers can use self-esteem and success as an example of a correlation explained by reverse causation and/or confounding variables, and can cover cultural differences such as individualism and collectivism. Overall, the best practice may be solutions that preserve high standards for learning but accommodate this generation's preferences.

Keywords

generations, narcissism, interactive learning, feedback, textbooks

We had just finished lunch when a faculty member in his 50s turned to me and said, "Here's what I really want to know from your talk: Are the students actually different now, or am I just getting old?"

Since the 2006 publication of my book on generational differences, *Generation Me*, I have heard this question at almost every faculty development seminar I have given. With the rapid pace of technological change, even young faculty members sometimes feel generationally disconnected from their students. Faculty also want to know how to bridge the generational gap and best understand those they teach. But are there true generational differences, or are these just perceptions biased by age and experience?

The best way to answer that question is to turn to empirical data—preferably time-lag data that can separate the effects of age and generation. Some studies gather the mean responses of students on popular psychological measures from published research reports and dissertations throughout the years (called a *cross-temporal meta-analysis*; see, e.g., Gentile, Twenge, & Campbell, 2010; Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011). Others rely on large, nationally representative surveys conducted every year, such as the Monitoring the Future survey of high school students or the American Freshman study of entering college students (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012).

individualism. Recent generations of young people are higher in self-esteem, agentic traits, assertiveness, and high expectations for the future (Gentile et al., 2010; Reynolds, Stewart, Sischo, & MacDonald, 2006; Twenge, 1997, 2001; Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012b). Narcissistic personality traits are also higher in more recent generations across four data sets (Stewart & Bernhardt, 2010; Twenge & Foster, 2010). One data set that originally showed no change in narcissism (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008) demonstrated a significant increase once a confounding variable was controlled (Twenge & Foster, 2010).

Perhaps most relevant for the classroom, entering college students are increasingly likely to believe they are above average in attributes such as academic ability, writing ability, intellectual self-confidence, and drive to achieve (Twenge et al., 2012b). These increases are not due to changes in actual ability, as objective measures such as standardized test scores have either remained stable or decreased over time. The increases are also not due to greater effort, as recent high school and college students report studying for fewer hours than their predecessors. One reason for students' inflated self-perceptions might lie in the more subjective feedback they receive in the form of grades: Twice as many high school students in 2010

Summary of Generational Differences

These studies have consistently found significant generational differences, especially in attitudes and traits connected to

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(vs. 1976) graduated with an A average. This also means that high school students have been given better grades for doing less work.

This generation also has unrealistically high expectations. Twice as many high school seniors in 2000 (vs. 1976) said they planned to earn a graduate degree; by 2000, fully half of high school seniors aimed for graduate education, and this rose to 59% by 2010. The number of people who actually earned graduate degrees, however, remained about 9% (Reynolds et al., 2006). The number of students who expected to work in a “professional” job also increased, with 75% of high school seniors expecting to work in such a job by the age of 30. Reynolds, Stewart, Sisco, and MacDonald (2006) concluded that recent generations had become too ambitious, with many setting goals that might not be right for them. Data on college students suggest the same: Three of four expect to earn an advanced degree, many more than actually will.

Young people are also increasingly optimistic about how they will perform in the future. In 1975, only one of three high school students predicted they would be a “very good” spouse or parent (the top choice offered), but by 2006, one of two predicted the same stellar outcome. Even more striking, two of three students in 2006 predicted they would be “very good” workers on a job (compared to one of two who guessed so in 1975). So by 2006, two thirds of students predicted that they would perform in the top 20% in their adult jobs (Twenge & Campbell, 2008).

Other generational shifts may also have implications for classroom teaching. Scores on a standard measure of creativity have declined, particularly since 1990 (Kim, 2011). College students are now more likely to say they value becoming very well-off financially and that they are attending college to make more money. They are also less likely to say they think about social issues or care about politics and government affairs (Twenge et al., 2012b).

On the positive side, today’s students are more likely to believe in racial and gender equality and are markedly more supportive of gay rights than previous generations (for a review, see Twenge, 2006). Younger generations also score higher on intelligence tests, particularly those measuring reasoning ability and math skills, though much of the gain occurred at the lower end of the IQ distribution (Flynn & Weiss, 2007). At the same time, fewer young people read books (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004), suggesting a decline in the ability to read long passages of text. Instead, young people read e-mails and short bits of text on web pages much more regularly than they read books.

Of course, not all variables show generational differences. Few generational differences appear in the importance of making a contribution to society, feeling hopeless, skipping school, wanting to own a business, and engaging in antisocial behavior (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010; Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman (2012)). High school students often do not show the generational increase in self-esteem found in middle school and college students (Gentile et al., 2010; Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2001). The lack of change in these variables

led Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010) to conclude that generational changes do not exist; however, the majority of studies, including their own, have shown generational differences on many variables. For example, Trzesniewski and Donnellan found generational differences larger than one tenth of a standard deviation on 20 of the 31 variables they analyzed. Generational differences also vary in size, and there is usually more variance among groups than between groups. Thus, as with any study of group differences, the average differences do not apply to every individual.

How Might These Generational Differences Impact Teaching?

The generational shifts toward individualism, overconfidence, and high expectations may impact the teaching of psychology in at least two ways. First, these shifts may have implications for the structure, style, and syllabus of a course. Second, they may influence the presentation of certain course content, particularly content on self-esteem, culture, gender, and ethnicity. It should be noted, however, that many of the teaching practices I recommend below have not been studied directly. Thus, although these recommendations stem from research on generational differences, future studies should examine directly whether they are more effective for this generation than for previous generations.

Due to the increase in self-confidence and narcissism, some faculty have noticed an increase in entitlement in the classroom. For example, Greenburger, Lessard, Chen, and Farruggia (2008) found that 65% of college students agreed that, “If I explain to a professor that I’m trying hard, he/she should increase my grade.” A third of college students also agreed that, “If I attend most of the classes, I deserve at least a B.” To combat these attitudes, the course syllabus should be very specific about what requirements students will need to earn certain grades; the syllabus should also note that grades will not be changed except for clerical or mathematical errors. Teachers should also eliminate or severely restrict special accommodations such as makeup exams; one way to do this is to allow each student to drop his or her lowest exam score.

Teachers can temper high expectations and overconfidence by providing frequent feedback. The old model of two tests—a midterm and a final—is not effective for this group. Instead, Generation Me benefits from a realistic assessment of their performance early in the process. Feedback on class presentations and writing assignments might also be more effective if it comes from fellow students, especially if several students provide similar criticisms. Having students provide feedback to one another makes it less likely that they will dismiss the feedback or deem the teacher unfair for giving negative feedback. Of course, students will need instruction on how to give feedback that is constructive, specific, and neither too blandly positive or too harshly negative. Fortunately, this is a useful skill for students to develop even apart from any benefits for lowering entitlement.

The decline in reading long texts such as books and the growth of technology revolving around images suggests that

teachers should use classroom time differently with this generation. Lectures should include plenty of images and short videos. Generation Me's self-confidence and easy access to information also leads them to prefer interactive learning to straight lectures. Demonstrations, lab activities, discussions, and Socratic questioning are all useful techniques for keeping students engaged.

Textbooks present another challenge, as many students do not read them (e.g., Sikorski et al., 2002). Textbook publishers are beginning to respond to generational changes by shortening undergraduate textbooks and printing more material in easy-to-digest chunks. This trend is likely to continue; few young people today, even high achievers, enjoy sitting quietly and reading a book. Instead, they attempt to multitask, doing homework while surfing the web and exchanging instant messages with friends (I say "attempt to" because research in cognitive psychology has demonstrated that people cannot truly multitask; instead, they must sequentially switch their attention back and forth, which depletes cognitive resources and makes multitasking a poor strategy, e.g., Pashler, 1998).

This generation's beliefs may also influence the discussion of popular topics in psychology courses. For example, many courses cover research on self-esteem. During this generation's lifetime, American culture has consistently linked self-esteem and even narcissism with success. Aphorisms such as "Believe in yourself, and you can do anything" and "You can be anything you want to be" are common (Twenge, 2006), and phrases such as "I'm the best," "Me first," "I love me," and "I am special" have increased substantially in American books since 1960 (Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012a).

However, most studies on self-esteem show no direct link to success (for a review, see Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). For example, most of the correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement disappears when outside variables such as family background are controlled. Any relation that is left is explained by achievement causing self-esteem, not by self-esteem causing achievement. Asian American children, for example, have the lowest self-esteem of any ethnic group in the United States (Twenge & Crocker, 2002), yet have the best academic achievement. Self-esteem and achievement are thus good examples of a correlation explained by reverse causation or confounding variables. At the same time, self-esteem and success makes for an interesting topic of discussion because it challenges the core beliefs of this generation of students.

Cultural differences are also fodder for discussion, as these students have been exposed to cultural differences online, on TV, and in the diverse backgrounds of the people they know. On the other hand, most students do not initially have the vocabulary or understanding of how cultures differ beyond superficial differences in language, dress, and food. Framing cultural differences in terms of individualism and collectivism often helps students understand the origin of their own beliefs and gives them a new perspective for understanding others.

Many in this generation see gender and racial equality as nonissues. They are too young to remember racial segregation or a time when women were discouraged from going to college

(in fact, women now receive nearly 60% of college degrees). Although they are aware of gender and racial differences, they often do not realize the bias and prejudice that still exists. Students are sometimes reluctant to discuss these issues at first, but especially if teachers begin with gender differences, lively discussions often result. In my social psychology classes, I often ask students, "If you could have only one child, would you want a girl, a boy, or does it not matter to you?" The inevitable mention of sexuality ("I wouldn't want a girl because I know what teenage boys are like—I am one!") is often enlightening.

General Advice for Teaching Generation Me

Although Generation Me has many strengths such as tolerance and a drive to succeed, some students can be *too* confident; others crack under the pressure of sustaining high achievement and develop mental health problems (for a review, see Twenge, 2006). Given rampant grade inflation, these students' previous educational experiences have often not prepared them for the hard work and challenges required to succeed.

Educators can take several steps to teach this generation better. First, teachers need to try to understand their students' perspectives and realize that they are reflections of their culture. Students are doing exactly what their parents and teachers and the media have taught them. Second, teachers need to meet their students "where they live" by breaking lectures into short chunks, using video, and promoting hands-on learning. However, standards for content and learning should remain the same and should be fair to everyone. If one student asks for, and receives, special treatment, it shortchanges the rest of the class and the "special" student in the long run (the longer he or she receives special treatment, the more difficult it will be to succeed in a world that does not confer special treatment just for asking). Educators cannot compromise on the material they are teaching. With more entitled students, more will demand better grades for less work—just as they received in high school.

Today's students often need the purpose and meaning of activities spelled out for them. Previous generations had a sense of duty and would often do what they were told without asking why. Most young people no longer respond to appeals to duty; instead, they want to know exactly why they are doing something and want to know they are having a personal impact. This is an opportunity: If young people understand the deeper meaning in what they are learning, they can bring their energy and passion to a task. Although self-esteem and narcissism do not necessarily help people succeed, teachers can harness their students' desire for attention by providing recognition for good performance and for helping others. Educators must make sure, however, that students' overconfidence does not lead to failure; educators should also emphasize the importance of less visible tasks.

Teaching Generation Me can be rewarding, especially if teachers can understand their students' perspective. It is not just that we are getting older (although we are!); today's students really are different. But we can take a page out of the book of youth and learn to adapt—not to compromise our standards,

but to make changes that both faculty and students will welcome.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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