Group Projects with Millennials: The Question of Not Why...But How

Catherine Kendall
Associate Professor
Department of Interior Design
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Chattanooga, Tennessee

Jessica Etheredge
Assistant Professor
Department of Interior Design
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Chattanooga, Tennessee

Dana Moody
Associate Professor/Department Head
Department of Interior Design
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Chattanooga, Tennessee

Ashley Cooper
Graduate Student
Department of Psychology
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Chattanooga, Tennessee

ABSTRACT

The ability to work in groups is fundamental to education and professional environments. Today's classrooms are predominately filled with Millennials who have been working in teams their whole lives. Millennials enjoy group work because it is perceived as more fun and gives them a sense of unity and collaboration; unfortunately, it also gives them a way to avoid risks (Alsop, 2008). So, how do characteristics and learning styles of Millennials affect group work? As educators generally stemming from the Baby Boomer and Gen X generations, many instructors are either unaware or misinformed on effective grouping strategies for Millennials. This paper explores the fundamentals differences of Millennials and how they translate into strategies for successful group work.

INTRODUCTION

Today's higher education classrooms are predominately filled with Millennials. But who are Millennials and what are their predominant attributes? A quick search of Wikipedia shows that Millennials, also known as Gen Yers, are generally the children of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. They are an ethically diverse generation "who are team players, optimistic, confident, trusting of authority, rule followers, achievers in school, and generally achievement oriented in everything they do" (Boston College Center for Work & Family, n.d.). Since the ability to work in groups is a fundamental component within classrooms of higher education and the professional environment, it would appear that Millennials would fall naturally into place with group work since they are accustomed to working in teams (Deloitte, 2009; Gursoy, Maier & Chi, 2008; Raines, 2002). They have been working in teams throughout their K-12 experience. Although Millennials enjoy group work because it is perceived as more fun and gives them a sense of unity and collaboration, it also gives them a way to avoid risks (Alsop, 2008). These characteristics and others affect how Millennials learn and work in groups. As educators stemming from the Baby Boomer and Gen X generations, many instructors are either unaware or misinformed on effective grouping strategies needed for Millennials. This paper explores the fundamental traits of Millennials and strategies to harness these traits for successful group work.

FUNDAMENTAL TRAITS

According to Howe and Strauss (2000), in their canonical *Millennials Rising: The Next Generation,* seven distinguishing traits define Millennials: Special, Sheltered, Confident, Team-oriented, Conventional, Pressured, and Achieving. To understand these traits, we must also understand how the traits were created. In general, Millennials are a product of the parents, educators, legislators, and general culture that collaborated to create a more child-centric society that spawned the *no-child-left-behind* era, where every child was valuable (Pattengale, n.d.). But we must look deeper into the traits of this generation to understand them fully.

Special

There is no doubt that the general culture, parents, and students believe that Millennials are unique, but the parents of this generation are defined by their children. Parents of Millennials waited until they achieved financial security to have children and then went to great pains with fertility treatments to conceive them (Pattengale, n.d.). Hence, Millennials were greatly anticipated by their parents. This focus of the Baby Boomer generation on their children created a strong sense of self-worth in Millennials that developed into an attitude of entitlement and a perceived unwillingness to work hard and pay their dues (The Futures Company, 2011).

Sheltered

Millennials are exposed to everything through popular media, which makes it tempting to think that they are tough, hardened individuals that can take on the world. In fact, we must remember that Millennials grew up in a sheltered life, defined by the 1990's youth safety movement and a dense structure of new regulations that guarded them (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). Spawned out of this structure came a plethora of helmets, pads, car seats, and "Baby on Board" signs, that led to a generation that was highly "buckled, watched, fussed over, and fenced in by wall-to-wall rules and chaperones" (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Although well meaning, the outcome of this sheltered lifestyle leans Millennials toward risk aversion (Pattengale, n.d).

Confident

As a generation, Millennials are an upbeat and positive bunch that is often dubbed as the sunshine generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Surveys show that 72% are happy in general with life and 90% are happy and excited about what the future holds (Noveck & Tompson, 2007; Pattengale, n.d). Millennial's use of analytical skills for long-term decision-making has been used to explain the turn around of previously negative behaviors from previous generations (Pattendale, n.d.), but more recent events such as the financial crises and inter-locking economies have lead to slightly fading results (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). Either way, this trait fills the halls of higher education with predominantly self-assured students.

Team-oriented

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, Millennials have a natural affinity for team orientation that developed from the likes of an unassuming purple dinosaur named Barney, high participation in team sports, use of school uniforms, and classroom emphasis on group work. (Howe & Strauss, 2000). They like teamwork, but prefer to collaborate and work in teams with their generational peers (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Skiba, 2006; Nicholas & Lewis, 2008). For them, life is best understood in communal categories and the message of "not letting a friend down" (Pattengale, n.d.). Millennials think group work is fun. Group work provides them with a sense of unity and collaboration, but also gives them a way to avoid risks (Alsop, 2008). Relationships are important and technology is used to support this value (Pattengale, n.d.). Research suggests their preference for group work stems from how they like to socialize in groups more than previous generations (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Their work style also supports their team-oriented approach. Millennials need to work in a social environment, often one that would appear to some as chaotic. They are good at multitasking and understand how to employ technology productively, and as a result, can produce good work at what appears to be last minute (Heskett, 2007).

Pressured

Raised by helicopter, workaholic parents in a struggling economy, Millennials have internalized the message that they have to maintain high GPAs, participate, and build strong resumes. Statistics also show that "people graduating during the recession years earned $100,000 less in cumulative net present-value earning" (The Futures Company, 2011). Bureau of Labor Statistics shows a 14% unemployment rate in recent student graduates of higher education. That is the highest level since the Great Depression. This combined with the mid-2010 facts that 37% had no job, internship rates have dropped 28% since 2008, and 23% had quit looking for work, it's no wonder that Millennials feel pressure (The Futures Group, 2011). The three biggest concerns for Millennials are grades, resumes, and landing a job. A positive note of this trait is that the pressure has led Millennials to a commitment in planning. They often have 5 and 10 year plans for their life.

Achievement

As mentioned above, Millennials are planners. Howe and Strauss (2000) state that they have big plans, particularly about their careers. Where their Baby Boomer parents had interest in accomplishment in arts and humanities and were internally driven, Millennials are more rationalistic (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This means that while Millennials are willing to put work into projects, they do not expect to gain insight or personal transformation from school (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). Routine multitasking may have also shortened their attention spans and caused them to lack critical thinking skills (Murray, 2004; Nicholas & Lewis, 2008). Nonetheless, Millennials are intelligent. Their SAT scores are the highest since 1974 (Pattengale, n.d.). They are smart and they know it, but they look for accomplishments both outside and inside the classroom. "Millennials may not place as much value on "work" as their supervisors have, but they may find themselves accommodating the demands of the workplace and behaving more like Baby Boomers once they become committed to particular projects and goals" (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

Conventional

Born into a divorce culture, Millennials are intensely aware of the fragile nature of family and hence feel that the idea of "Family" is key (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). They are a generation comfortable with rules and regulations since they have been surrounded by them throughout their life. They feel that the rules of their parents, teachers, and coaches make their life easier. They embrace activities that reinforce and support their family values and think that someday they can apply them to "run the show" much better (Howe & Stowe, 2000). Tim Clydesdale (2007) goes on to state that Millennial students in higher education default to familiar American cultural standards embraced by their parents rather than resisting them, thereby suppressing their core identities and not often allowing for demonstration of their own creativity and ability. But others think that the embrace of Boomer parent values and team dynamics have not created a reversal of individualism but a contemporary manifestation of it, a type of "hyper-individualism on steroids" (The Futures Company, 2011).

STRATEGIES

The complex set of fundamental traits outlined by Howe and Strauss (2007) stand as excellent points of departure for the creation of pedagogy in higher education that supports and mentors the needs of the Millennial generation. Many of the traits that Millennials have can be very positive, but they also hold a "shadow side" that must be addressed. For example, confidence should be encouraged, but guarded against becoming arrogance (Howe & Strauss, 2007). So, what perspectives on organizational relationships and performance can be offered so that successful pedagogies for group projects can abound? Strategies include: structure, leadership and guidance, measures, and engagement. The collaborative learning of group projects, actually works towards building the character trait of *Confidence* within Millennials.

Structure

Millennials require strict structure to perform on group projects successfully. As educators, we often have a tendency to create more loosely organized group projects, and hence Millennials become frustrated and often fall apart. Many educators have written off these students as deficient, lazy, or unmotivated. This perception often comes from the fact that older generations were brought up in a more open-ended system full of exploration. How the Millennials handle loosely organized group work ties into two of Howe and Strauss's (2000) fundamental traits: *Sheltered* and *Achievement*. With respect to *Sheltered*, this trait goes much deeper than just meaning that Boomers overprotected their children. In fact, Millennials came through their K-12 and other societal experiences in an environment of strict rules and regulations. They expect the same kind of structure in the organization of group projects and do not have time for the open exploration we experienced. Their world is objective driven and broken down into modules. Providing a purposeful group project with multiple manageable individual phases could help support the structured character makeup of Millennials.

The issue of how to formulate class groups in the classroom setting is often unclear for instructors. Overall, the students were open to the idea of working collaboratively to complete tasks; however, multiple students expressed concerns relating to how the groups were formed. Employing organized groups of students is imperative in developing successful groups (Katzenbach, Entel & Mahony, 2002). Two known methods are documented for determining group membership: self-selection and assignment. The chief characteristic of self-selection allows students to choose who is in their group (James, McInnis, & Devlin, 2002). Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) published an article that observed the natural tendency of students, who were allowed to choose their own groups. Students leaned towards forming groups that were "homogenous with respect to ability and culture... (which) often resulted in strong teams and weak teams"(CMU, n.d.). There-

fore Rau and Heyl (1990) believe that allowing students to choose their group members is most appropriate for "... trial or ungraded sessions. These temporary groups allow students to get to know others in the classroom." (see also Kendall & Moody, 2011)

When instructors assign members to a group, their choices can be intentional, random, or on the basis of a criterion selection (CMU, n.d.; Rau & Heyl, 1990). If an instructor chooses to intentionally group students, Katzenbach et al. (2002) stated that complimentary skills should be the strongest building block for designing a group. On the other hand, CMU suggests grouping students by motivation in order to prevent students with a motivated work ethic from being responsible for students with a weaker work ethic (CMU, n.d.). Random assignment of students to a group is simply grouping students without a specific method or pattern. This technique can be effective; however it creates a strong possibility for "free-riders" who take advantage of the work of others (Rau & Heyl, 1990). Criterion-based selections are typically used when instructors want to group students based on ability because a test or examination are used to gauge student's aptitude (Rau & Heyl, 1990). Both Rau and Heyl (1990) and CMU (n.d.) believe all the afore mentioned grouping strategies to be effective; however prior knowledge, skill, role, diversity and size are all important factors that should be considered when forming groups (Kendall & Moody, 2011).

Apart from selecting the type of method to use with regard to group formation in collaborative projects, the group size should be considered. There are benefits and negative consequences associated with the number of members in each group. Problems arise when groups are too large. Large groups make it hard to ensure that all students participate and contribute equally within the group (Raul & Heyl, 1990). Member expectations and/or member roles can also become blurred and lack clear direction (Russ & Dickinson, 2008). Katzenbach et al. (2002) noted a "herding" effect that affects large groups, a reference to a large group whose vision becomes unclear and/or settles on vague statements of purpose because of a lack of clear direction or leadership. In contrast, forming groups that are too small can create a lack in experience among members, a lack of diversity, or a lack of varying thinking styles (Raul & Heyl, 1990). Raul & Heyl (1990) suggest that the formation of permanent groups helps to maintain consistency and stability among group members (Kendall & Moody, 2011).

Leadership and Guidance

Millennials have been nurtured throughout their lives with constant coaching and feedback and they expect it to continue in the classrooms of higher education. Providing this guidance keeps Millennials engaged in their work. Millennials need to be taught how to handle personal interaction and conflict. For them, life is best understood in communal categories and messages that emphasize "not letting a friend down", which are more effective than messages directed toward self-interest (Pattengale, n.d.). Also, help them democratize their group. Ask them to elect a group leader and structure the project with a business-like hierarchy, where group members report to group leaders, and group leaders report to the boss.

Alasdair Macintyre stated in his article entitled *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1984) that in the world today "the language of morality" is in a state of grave disorder" so much that we only have a "simulation of morality." Given this societal problem, the issue of ethics must become a prominent feature of any class. Millennial characteristics of *Special*, *Confident*, and *Achievement* oriented are attributes "that can easily move towards excessive, self-absorption and even narcissism (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). Millennials also have a high regard for their groups and are more likely to turn this regard inward, creating a "tribal" focus that can devalue respect for set canon of behavior with regard to ethics (Hersch, 1999). "When coupled with 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" (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). Therefore, rigorous attention to the ethics of learning must be openly communicated.

Measures

The high *Achievement* characteristic of Millennials makes them extremely interested in their grades. Howe and Strauss (2000) state that Millennial students are fearful of grades and failing. Today's students "want to know how their grades stand throughout the semester and are accustomed to this sort of frequent feedback in most of the aspects of their lives.... They insist on having a transparent grade-checking system that is continually updated" (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). A very easy way to incorporate this point-of-service style is to use an educational program such as Blackboard Learn, a learning management system that puts grades and assignments on-line and at student fingertips. Such systems reinforce the Millennial characteristic of *Achieving* since the inline assignment grading feature enables instructors to "view assignments and provide feedback within the web browser" (Blackboard, 2013). The addition of SafeAssign, an add-on offered to Blackboard users, allows plagiarism within written components of projects to be detected. "In addition to acting as a plagiarism deterrent, it also has features designed to aid in educating students about plagiarism and importance of proper attribution of any borrowed content" (Blackboard, 2011). Quizzes can also be created in Blackboard that allow students to test their knowledge on practice exams and verify understanding before taking an in-class exam in class (Blackboard, 2013).

With regard to actual grading, instructors are faced with the difficult challenge of grading group work fairly. In their article entitled, *Assessing Group Work,* James et al. (2002) provided two suggestions for grading group work fairly. They suggest providing two grades: one grade for the overall group and one grade for each individual in the group. The need for an individual grade is vital to Millennials because of their *Achievement* characteristic. They look for ways to pull ahead of the crowd. Besides that fact, "work-products of the group are largely individual (and) each member has strong individual accountability to his or her task" (Katzenbach, 2002). The individual grade component helps avoid the logistical problems of the "free-rider" phenomenon and non-contributing group members. Further support for providing individual grades and how they can produce personal accountability among students was shown in the Carnegie Mellon University article. There is also the issue of student overestimation of the quality of the work done. Too often, the Millennial *Achievement* characteristic impels them to overestimate the value of their efforts and appeal for top grades (Wilson & Gerber, 2008) (Kendall & Moody, 2011).

Engagement

Millennials are more focused on meaningful work (Boston College Center for Work and Family, n.d.) Their learning and communication style is through multi-media. The common method of contact is text messaging and instant messaging, as well as cell phones. Trying to stimulate the learning process for the generation that grew up with the internet is a challenge. Millennials are said to be experiential, engaging, and interactive (Nicolas, 2008). They "want to work quickly and creatively, and they want to do it their way" (Zemke, Raines, & Filipezak, 2000).

Millennials have grown up with vast choices in their lives and education. They think that it is their birthright to have them. Wilson and Gerber (2008) suggest that it is a good idea to let Millennials have "input into the design of their projects, grading systems or rubrics, and teamwork activities" (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). Palloff and Pratt (2001) follow that instructors should have set guidelines for the class overall, but allow some flexibility and room for negotiation. Wilson and Gerber (2008) go on to advocate for the tradition of student-centered learning. All of the above information addresses multiple fundamental characteristics of Millennials such as *Special*, *Confident*, and *Achievement*.

CONCLUSION

The ability to work in groups is a fundamental component to any educational or professional environment (Colbeck, Campbell, & Bjorklund, 2000); however, this statement is especially applicable to earlier generations teaching students of today. Millennials are more adept at managing in a changing, global, and networked environment. They will do it with great emphasis on teamwork, facility with use of technology, and sensitivity for needs of balance in life and work (Heskett, 2007). Millennials are high maintenance, high risk, and often high output individuals (Heskett, 2007), but the most crucial point of understanding the characteristics of the Millennial generation is often lost in more complex cultural and societal dynamics (Howe & Strauss, 2007). "That point is simply, our students are not entirely like us.... What is generally true for others our own age, is not necessarily true of the generation of students that now make up our undergraduate population" (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Instructors must understand what makes their students "tick," in order to create efficient and effective group projects in the classrooms of higher education.

REFERENCES

Alsop, R. (2008). *The trophy kids group up: How the Millennial generation is shaping up the workplace.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Blackboard Inc. (2013). *BlackBoard learn: Products.* Retrieved from: http://www.blackboard.com/Platforms/Learn/Products/Blackboard-Learn.aspx

BlackBoard Inc. (2011). *About SafeAssign.* Retrieved from: http://wiki.safeassign.com/display/SAFE/About+SafeAssign

Boston College Center for Work and Family (n.d.). *Creating tomorrow's leaders: the expanding roles of Millennials in the workplace,* Executive Briefing Series. Retrieved from http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/cwf/pdf/BCCWF%20EBS-Millennials%20FINAL.pdf

Carnegie Mellon University (CMU, n.d.). *Creating student groups, enhancing education*. Retrieved from http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects/creatingstudentgroups

Clydesdale, T. (2007). *The first year out: Understanding American teens after high school*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Colbeck, C., Campbell, S., & Bjorklund, S. (2000). Grouping in the dark. *Journal of Higher Education*, 71(1), 60-83.

Deloitte (2009). *State of the media democracy survey.* Retrieved from http://www.deloitte.com/view/en_US/us/Industries/media-entertainment/media-democracy-survey/index.htm?id=us_furl_tmt_general_tmt-trends_mainushp_031913#&panel1-1

The Futures Company (2011). *Millennials in crisis: What team dynamic and the crisis of chrysalis mean for marketers.* Retrieved from http://thefuturescompany.com/free-thinking/millennials-in-crisis/

Gursoy, P., Maier, T., & Chi, C. (2008). Generational differences: An examination of work values and generational gaps in the hospitality workforce. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 27*, 458-488.

Hersch, P. (1999). *A tribe apart: A journey into the heart of American adolescence.* New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Heskett, J. (2007). *How will Millennials manage? HBS Working Knowledge.* Retrieved from http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/5736.html

Howe, N. & Strauss, W. (2000). *Millennials rising: The next great generation*. New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Howe, N. & Strauss, W. (2007). *Millennials go to college: Strategies for a new generation on campus. (2nd ed.).* Great Falls, VA: Lifecourse Associates.

James, R., McInnis, C., & Devlin, M. (2002). *Assessing group work.* Melbourne University. Retrieved from http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/03/group.html

Katzenbach, J., Entel, T., & Mahony, K. (2002). Team dynamics. *Interior Design Handbook of Professional Practice.* New York, NY: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

Kendall, C. & Moody, D. (2011). *Teamwork means never having to blame yourself: A look at improving group projects within the interior design curriculum*. Paper presented at the Interior Design Educators Council: Design with Intelligence, Denver, Colorado. http://www.idec.org/documents/idec-2011-proceedings-web-version.pdf

Lancaster, L. C. & Stillman, D. (2002). *When generations collide.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After virtue: A study in moral theory (2nd ed.).* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Murray, J. (2004). Nursing: The next generation. *Nursing Education Perspectives 25*(3), 106.

Myers, K. & Sadaghiani, K. (2010). Millennials in the workplace: A communication perspective on Milennials' organizational relationships and performance. *Journal of Business and Psychology 25*(2), 225-238

Nicholas, A. & Lewis, J. (2008). Millennial attitudes toward books and e-books. *The International Journal of the Book*, *5*(2), 81-92.

Novek, J. & Tompson, T. (2007). *Poll: Family ties key to youth happiness*. The Associated Press. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/20/AR2007082000451.html

Palloff, R. & Pratt, K. (2001). *Lessons from the cyberspace classroom: The realities of on-line teaching.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pattengale, J. (n.d.). *Millennials & the work experience.* Grant County Growth Council, Innovative Network and the Human Resources Association. Retrieved from http://www.inpathways.net/millennials.pdf

Raines, C. (2002). *Connecting generations: The sourcebook for a new workplace.* Berkley, CA: Crisp Publications.

Rau, W. & Heyl, B. (1990). Humanizing the college classroom: Collaborative learning and social organization among students. *Teaching Sociology, 18* (2), 141-155.

Russ, R. & Dickinson, J. (2008). Collaborative design: "Forming, storming, and norming". *Journal of Interior Design*, *25* (2), 52-58.

Skiba, D. (2006). The Millennials: Have they arrived at your school of nursing? *Nursing Education Perspectives 25*(6), 370-371.

Wilson, M. & Gerber, L. (2008). How generational theory can improve teaching: Strategies for working with the Millennials. *Currents in Teaching and Learning, 1*(1), 29-44.

Zemke, R., Raines, C., & Filipezak, B. (2000). *Generations at work: Managing the clash of veterans, boomers, xers, and nexters in your workplace.* New York: Amacon.