Today's Learners and Educators: Bridging the Generational Gaps

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ABSTRACT

In today's nursing education, there are generational differences among students and educators. Many questions arise as educators wrestle with ideas to assist the students to become successful nurses. The article explores characteristics of current learners and strategies for bridging generational gaps. Through a comprehensive literature review, common solutions emerged centering on the acronym *ACT*: "A" for assessing and appreciating learner characteristics, "C" for committing to relationships and collaboration, and "T" for teaching with interactive learning techniques.

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Introduction

In today's nursing education and practice arenas, there are multiple generational differences among students, faculty, and nurses. Many questions arise as educators wrestle with ideas and strategies to assist students to become successful nurses "Who are the learners today?" "How do these learners impact education and practice?" "What are the best positive teaching–learning environment for all generations?"

The majority of nursing students currently are considered millennial learners, whereas most of the educators in higher education are from the baby boomer era creating more than a 30-year generational gap. Millennials today are between ages 19 and 35 years and make up the largest living population in the United States (Fry, 2016). Nurse educators' average ages range from 51 to 61 years depending on education level and academic rank (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2015). With this generational gap, multiple priorities emerge for educators and nurses in preparing tomorrow's workforce to appraise and blend generational characteristics, life experiences, values, work habits, technology, and approaches to nursing care (American Nurses Association, 2014; Nelsey & Brownie, 2012).

In this article, the author conducted an extensive review of the literature to explore the characteristics of current learners and educators and identify strategies for bridging generational gaps in preparing nurses to thrive in the current health care environment. Three common strategies emerged for educating today's learners. The author created the acronym *ACT* to facilitate the discussion: "A" for assessing and appreciating learner characteristics, "C" for committing to relationships and collaboration, and "T" for teaching with interactive learning techniques.

Assessing and Appreciating Learner Characteristics

Millennial students in the higher education are very different than the baby boomer educators. Millennials approach education through a different set of lens and energy level. In the book *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation,* Howe and Strauss (2000) identified positive characteristics and challenges for millennials centering on their upbringing, attitudes, and behavior. Millennials tend to be confident, smart working individuals who prefer working in groups. They respect rules and expect positive affirmation and feedback on how to succeed. While millennials feel great pressure to achieve, their self-esteem and reliance stem from close relationships with parents and peers. Baby boomers are the parents of the millennials who hovered over and sheltered their children making sure that they had everything they wanted and needed. Parents and peers flock to the millennial's side to help them solve problems, which reinforce the sheltered lifestyle (Howe & Strauss, 2007).

The majority of students in college today are the maturing adults from the era of "No Child Left Behind." The "No Child Left Behind" law from 2002 brought many changes to the primary educational system with the main goal of ensuring success for all students. Resources and time spent on elevating performance on standardized testing, which brought about teaching to the test and memorization rather than understanding the content for application. Administrators and teachers were held responsible for performance rather than the student's responsibility. Teachers found that this created less time to motivate learning and practice problem-solving skills (Trolian & Fouts, 2011).

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The staff at one university identified three major issues of millennials transitioning to college. Millennials believe that they are exempt from following the rules, approach problem solving passively, and are dependent on others for problemsolving. Millennials are not completely to blame as they have helicopter parents and peers to help meet their needs and make decisions for them. Their life is displayed on social media for all to see, and others offer their opinions readily and provide support through a variety of venues. They are optimists to the extreme of unrealistic expectations many times(Much, Wagener, Breitkreutz, & Hellenbrand, 2014).

As educators take steps to assess and appreciate characteristics of the learner, it is important to remember that millennials are a reflection of their culture. Educators need to meet students where they are without compromising standards. Millennials have flourished in the primary and secondary school systems with good grades and were taught using a variety of methods such as group work, use of videos and computers, and short bursts of information reinforced with repetition. In most of the students' education, the information learned occurred in class with little to no homework to encourage critical thinking. Students' study habits, reading textbooks, or learning outside of classroom were not developed until going to college. Therefore, it is important to stress the purpose of an activity and outline the steps for development and evaluation while guiding the student through the process (Twenge, 2013).

Millennials plug into technology continually and have the advantage of being able to learn whatever, whenever, and wherever. On the other hand, baby boomers had to visit the library or buy books to access information. Many baby boomers may still have their favorite books as references and cherish their hard copies of the wonderfully illustrated encyclopedias. With this in mind, it is easy to understand why baby boomer teachers prefer reading and listening to lectures to process information while millennial students prefer self-paced and interactive learning (Baker, Matulich, & Papp, 2007).

Millennials approach learning at the speed of light gathering bits and pieces of information through technology at their fingertips. This generation is also known as the *net generation*because of their ability to multitask with all forms of technology. The educator may become frustrated as they watch millennials with their cell phones and computers accessing information in face-to-face classes while also listening to on-line lectures and music, shopping on-line, surfing the net, or completing homework assignments. Millennials encompass the motto "work smarter not harder" (Reilly, 2012).

Oblinger, Oblinger, and Lippincott (2005) studied learning for several decades and found that millennials prefer experiential learning while interacting with peers. Millennials are visual and kinesthetic learners and learn best by doing. As millennials grew up with computers, they learned to deal with information in very different ways than earlier generations. They prefer to construct information in a network pattern, whereas baby boomers think in a linear fashion.

In assessing the learner's needs, Reilly (2012) advocates for eliciting continuous course evaluation by students and asking for suggestions for improvement. Millennials value and expect constant feedback on their work and benefit from specific guides/grading rubrics. There are multiple strategies for engaging students in active learning, which range from storytelling, role-play, group work, low- and high-fidelity simulation, social media, and learning management systems such as Iclickers. Iclickers have been shown to improve learning by helping the learner assess their strengths and weaknesses while reinforcing the important concepts. Providing real-world examples can assist the learner in transferring knowledge from one event to another or from one semester to the next semester (Broussard, 2012; Kushinka & Bearman, 2011).

Millennials have been given multiple opportunities to master content in elementary and secondary school. Today's learners expect teachers to streamline information and tell them the "who, what,

why" of learning while providing structure and immediate feedback on progress (Broussard, 2012). With varied diversity in the classroom, educators need to appraise their bias and understanding of learners to facilitate the learning process. Educators should seek to understand each generation and find ways to address learning styles of all students. Preparing tomorrow's nurses to meet health care challenges will take a multigenerational approach by using different generational teams to foster appreciation of each other's beliefs, values, learning, communication styles, and thinking processes (Kramer, 2010).

Educators must collaborate with learners to understand one another and make changes in the learning environment. In higher education, learners need to develop both intellectually and personally to become productive citizens. Assessing the learner characteristics, reflecting on the context of which millennials learn rather than only reacting to learners, and becoming interactive with today's students guide a more learner-centered environment (Bauman, Marcha, McLain, O'Connell, & Patterson, 2014).

Committing to Relationships and Collaboration

Since birth, millennials have been surrounded by parents, teachers, coaches, and peers providing positive encouragement, protecting them, and lifting their self-esteem. They work in teams where everyone wins. With nursing school as a stressful and challenging experience, there is no question that millennials want and need mentors, advisors, and cheerleaders to guide them through this new journey. Committing to developing relationships among educators and learners helps to foster collaborative learning and bridge generational gaps.

Welcoming and nurturing the learner into the role of the nurse takes considerable patience, hard work, and hope for success. Role modeling professional nursing behaviors and communication is a vital aspect of developing collaborative partnerships. Developing strong relationships and collaboration in the teaching–learning process takes the common set of values, goals, and shared commitment by both the learner and teacher. As each generation becomes aware of each other's history, values, hopes, dreams, learning styles, and personalities, common ground can be found, and relationships grow. The core differences can be appreciated, whereas any inappropriate behaviors addressed. Educators have the opportunity to instill new habits and nursing roles in the student. Teaching–Learning partnerships are forged by awareness, appreciation, and communication among all parties (DHed, 2012).

Out-of-class gatherings have proven to be a way to build relationships with students and faculty. As students and faculty feel more comfortable with each other, it helps to foster discussions of learning and development of ownership for self-learning. For example, before- and after-class discussions with students are great opportunities to learn more about the student as a person and experiences they may bring to the table of learning (Knowlton & Hagopian, 2013).

However, getting to know the student may also bring a new set of problems. Some millennials tend to share too much personal information, are very opinionated, see themselves as special, do not take constructive criticism well, and often display unrealistic goals. In professional programs, these attitudes and behaviors can prove challenging and unproductive often leading to failure. At one medical school, faculty decided to change the way they taught and began a mentoring program with students to develop collaborative relationships. The faculty increased efforts and opportunities for communicating clear expectations with explanations, providing orientation, reflecting on work/school/life balance, providing structure, handling negative feedback, incorporating collaborative activities, interactive learning experiences, and praising successes. Faculty had to become flexible and adaptable to impact positive outcomes for the learner and educator (Eckleberry-Hunt & Tucciarone, 2011).

In the teaching environment, there are many prospects for connecting with millennials. Baby boomers favor face-to-face interactions, whereas millennials communicate through various technologies such as Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, and others. On-line communication is another way to keep the teaching–learning environment fluid through e-mail, discussion boards, Facebook, learning management systems, weekly announcements, virtual office, document sharing, webliography, and synchronous chat (Koeller, 2012).

Anstadt, White, and Medley (2013) redesigned a social work course to move from a content-focused to a learner-focused environment while taking into account the characteristics of the millennials. The teacher acted as a coach or mentor while the students work in groups. The focus was on experiential learning and role playing to assist the students in knowledge application and evaluation. Through reflective writing assignments, the student's knowledge was assessed. Adapting the teaching–learning environment for collaboration and group work increased student engagement in the learning process and fostered growth in both individual and group skills.

Robb (2016) promotes learner-centered approaches to engage millennials through repetition, summarization of important concepts, and experiential learning. The author studied nursing students and the relationship between self-learning behavior and grade point average. The learner's ability to assess, plan, and evaluate their learning habits helps motivate the learner and process information into the memory. Concept mapping, outlining, developing analogies, and class debates were excellent ways to rehearse and reinforce this learning. The results of the study showed that students with high grade point averages used some of these more advanced learning approaches to make connections and identify strengths and weaknesses in self-learning.

There have been successes in developing collaborative learning spaces that cultivate engagement, socialization, and creativity to address generational teaching–learning challenges. Students need creative support in tapping into their potential to build skills, relationships, and communities. A student's reflection assists to appraise his or her strengths, limitations, passions, and motivate learning. When students are motivated to learn with a sense of purpose, it can unlock their curiosity and experimentation. Working in groups help students search for solutions and apply the information. Connecting through living communities on campus and peer tutoring activities have been positive steps in bringing students together for successful learning experiences and collaborative relationships (Karakas, Manisaligil, & Sarigollu, 2015).

Teaching With Interactive Learning Techniques

College students today learn entirely different than the majority of their teachers, which can create challenges in bridging generational gaps with effective teaching–learning strategies. Educators have been working for the last 20 years to move from "sage on the stage" lecturing to "guide on the side" coaching. Students today are very comfortable with technology. Their brains have been wired differently as a result of growing up in a multimedia-rich environment. Students like to gather and process information by utilizing search engines, on-line lessons, and explanations that are concise. It is imperative that educators engage students in the learning process using interactive learning techniques (Morrison, 2014).

For millennials, technology is their first language, whereas for most educators, technology is a second language. As educators find ways to adopt learner-centered teaching strategies, generational collaboration is essential in providing an environment to enhance critical thinking and technology skills. Students constantly interact through Facebook, GroupMe, Snapchat, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, blogs, and Wikis to connect with their peers. Educators need time and support in learning to use a variety of technology (Litchfield & Matteis, 2016).

Stephens and Gunther's (2016) research supports earlier research studies showing the benefits of social media in education. The research project examined nursing students' satisfaction with using Twitter messages for 6 weeks to build resilience. Weekly reminders and positive tips for handling stress were shared. Students liked the ease of accessing information that did not take a lot of time. Other positive benefits of using social media included increased engagement and opportunities to reflect on relevant information.

With an attention span of 7–10 minutes, learners tend to learn more outside the classroom as they use technology to pull together material and reflect on bits of information. It is more engaging and efficient to break the material down into small chunks and incorporate interactive learning methods. When students are having fun learning and using their imagination, they tend to learn more. Relating the learning material to real life and incorporating group work help students to see how and why the concepts apply to various situations (Oblinger et al., 2005). Using all of the senses, specifically auditory, visual, and kinesthetic, helps to prevent boredom and encourages engagement with the learning material (Baker et al., 2007). As students use multiple senses in learning, it fosters committing the information to long-term memory for recall at a later date. Creating learning spaces with the use of interactive methods require flexibility and comfortability of the learner and teacher, sensory stimulation, technology support, and co-learning in different areas across the campus (Oblinger & Lippincott, 2006).

Internationally, mindmapping has proven useful as a creative way for supporting problem solving with logical thinking. Studies show that mind mapping assists the student in organizing, assuming relationships, and understanding new information and committing it to memory (Muñoz et al., 2014; Rosciano, 2015). Students can use mind mapping in note taking, reflection, and a way to connect concepts. In one research study, nursing students were asked a series of questions and watched videos as related to mind mapping thinking strategy. The majority of students used mind mapping as a critical thinking tool to help unlock their creativity. Mind mapping is an interactive learning approach that can be used to help students identify the nurse's role in caring for patients, families, and communities.

Another way to teach students to problemsolve is to create opportunities for discussion and peer interactions. Eisner (2011) instituted three projects in an undergraduate education course to support an active learning environment. The first project involved students establishing an individual performance contract after evaluation of their first assignment. Students developed goals and action plans for improving their skills. If goals were met, the student could receive possible five or more points to the final course grade. The second project focused on an investigative report to enhance the students' understanding of international developments. Groups of students worked to research an issue, write a report, and present findings to the entire class. The third project involved a class game show similar to "Who Wants to be a Millionaire." During class time, student teams developed the content for the game by writing questions for specific chapter content. Students evaluated the projects positively for providing a learning environment that was challenging, exciting, empowering, realitybased, and learnercentered. The game show ranked highest for helping students understand the content, how to study for tests, and the importance of reading. All the projects fostered the students' self-confidence, connection to peers, and increased test scores.

Peer tutoring or peer teaching–learning is an example of a successful mentoring experience in which students can help one another enhance their learning along with role and skill development (Priharjo & Hoy, 2011; Stone, Cooper, & Cant, 2013). Peer tutoring can happen in different patterns: one-on-one tutoring, one-on-two

tutoring, small or large group tutoring, skilled-based activities, or assignment-based activities. The key to successful peer mentoring is a relationship built on commonalities in learning styles, content, backgrounds, and goals. Peer learning can enhance personal and professional skills (Arnedale, 2014).

Nursing education lends itself to learning by doing through clinical and classroom experiences that are valuable learning tools for millennials. Educators can empower students to become more active in the learning process by teaching with interactive learning techniques such as vignettes, simulation, service learning, problem-based studies, peer learning, and reflective activities.

Implications for Tomorrow's Nurses

Positively affecting the teaching–learning environment does not stop after graduating nursing school. As millennials enter the workforce, there is a potential for continued growth and improvements and misunderstandings and conflict. The millennials' skills of multitasking, collaboration, and use of technology can be assets in both the academic and work environment. As the millennial student transitions to practice, they will need to be self-aware and appreciate potential differences with nurses of all generations. It is important for millennials to strengthen their written and face-to-face communication and values clarification to collaborate with healthcare team members and patients. Enhancing problemsolving, prioritizing, stress management, and conflict resolution skills are valuable tools for millennials as they transition to practice (Johanson, 2012).

In one research study, nursing faculty found emerging themes as millennials worked with preceptors during a nursing preceptorship course. Evidence of generational differences of past versus the present provided challenges and conflicts. The participants felt that nurses eat their young, relive the past too often, and have a general lack understanding of generations, which leads to personality clashes. Recommendations offered were for educators, students, and nurses to collaboratively work together to create an inclusive work environment for all nurses (Foley, Myrick, & Yonge, 2013).

Generational diversity in the workplace is not a new issue and is evident in all environments. The most common generational conflicts are over work ethics and technology. Ways to decrease these conflicts have been addressed by assessing and supporting the individual's needs rather than a generation, providing opportunities for collaboration and communication, and holding all workers accountable for the same expectations, rules, and policies. Employees respond to different types of rewards and feedback. Baby boomers want positive affirmation and live to work, whereas millennials prefer personal mentoring and feedback with flexible scheduling (Kramer, 2010).

In the education and health care environments, leaders and educators are looking for ways to enhance effective communication, teamwork, and use of technology to effect positive patient outcomes. There are possible five different generations in the workforce with their ages ranging from 18 to 80 years. Generation Z (igeneration) are born from 1992 to present. Generation Y (Millennials) are born from 1977 to 1991. Generation X (latch-key children) are born from 1965 to 1976. Baby Boomers (Boomers) are born from 1946 to 1964. The Silent Generation (veterans) are born from 1937 to 1945. With the importance of life-long learning in the discipline, a variety of interactive teaching strategies focusing on the learner will be needed to reach all generations. The value of these teaching strategies needs to be explained to facilitate critical thinking and team building (Bell, 2013).

Conclusion

Higher education has become something different from 25 years ago. Today, college education is a big business, which is customer driven with increased focus on recruitment, retention, and graduation. Along with budget reductions and limitations, more and more institutions are looking for creative and lucrative ways to thrive in this economy. As millennials grew up in a self-centered world, these same expectations continue to college. Millennials plan for the college degree to be customized to meet their needs with anticipation that anyone can succeed in college no matter the effort expended because they or their parents are paying for the degree (Bauman et al., 2014; Reilly, 2012).

In assessing and appreciating the learner characteristics, educators can leverage the students' strengths to success. Faculty can no longer afford to approach the teaching–learning process as the sole teacher lecturing with one-way transmission of knowledge while the learner just memorizes the information (King, 2012). Today's learners are different, and committing to collaborative relationships in the teaching–learning process is paramount in molding tomorrow's nurses. Peer learning opportunities such as peer questioning, think–pair–share, scenario development, and skill teaching are some of the activities that can help the faculty move into a more interactive learning environment.

In reviewing the literature for strategies to assist today's learners to success, it is evident that there is not just one method that is useful but multiple ones. Success among generational educators and learners require numerous and varied strategies that focus on the individual and not on generational labels. Providing consistent opportunities for coaching, support, communication, and collaboration helps foster growth and learning. Adaptation to change is challenging for anyone and requires involvement of all parties. Forming partnerships with teachers, learners, peers, and nurses promote mutual understanding and respect for generational differences. Teaching students to unplug and reflect on learning will motivate students to become an active partner in critical thinking. Merging new with the old educational pedagogies will strengthen the teaching–learning environment (Eisner, 2011).

Success strategies for making content relevant and realworld is to vary the pace, explore new ideas, and include activities that use all the senses to employ thinking, doing, and feeling. It is important that both teachers and learners reflect on the learning. As baby boomers and millennials work collaboratively to relate to one another, build positive self-esteem and coping strategies, enhance patience and work hard, the teaching–learning environment will continue to transform for success. Educators can adapt to millennial learning by assessing and appreciating the learner's characteristics, sharing expectations of learning, cultivating caring relationships, making learning fun and interactive, teaching critical thinking, providing opportunities for collaboration, and giving frequent feedback (Reilly, 2012; Twenge, 2013).

Millennials are our past, present, and future. By using the acronym *ACT*: "A" for assessing and appreciating learner characteristics, "C" for committing to relationships and collaboration, and "T" for teaching with interactive learning techniques, educators and students can create a successful academic partnership. As baby boomers, we helped create this journey and can collaborate with others in shaping each day for a bright tomorrow.

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