

Millennial-Centric Learning: Revisiting Education with Changed Mindset

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Abstract

The corporate world is rapidly being infused with fresh talent, that's arguably, quite unlike their predecessors. The new breed of workforce is redefining the professional landscape and value-sets; as to, what's right, and what's not; creating new governing rules of engagement between the associates and companies; and, meeting increasing demands at workplace versus the growing expectations of employees. The motivating and hygiene factors are much different today, than what used to be. The age of millennials (for purposes of this paper defined as, born after 1980) has verily come to stay.

Often, especially in Indian context, surveys over-pour screaming that graduating students from Indian universities are not adequately employable (NASSCOM Perspective 2020, 2009). Anecdotal figures pit the average training time at entry level in ITES sector as above 16 weeks. Finishing schools, just like coaching centers for academic examinations, are mushrooming by the day; at times, are directly sponsored by the universities (tacitly acknowledging that current educational system is falling short of expectations). Both, industry and academia, is echoing serious concern.

While the reality of skill gaps between industry needs, and the academia produce, is one side of the coin; there is perhaps, another perspective which has not received adequate attention. Are we grooming our youngsters by applying primitive mindsets to modern brains? Are we acknowledging the realities of changes in societal value systems, than

grimacing on how we lived in the past? Are our academic institutes and universities nurturing flexibility, and adequately accepting the changing learning needs of the millennials?

This paper seeks to provoke a discussion on how the millennials of today be groomed in the universities and professional institutes. How should a cradle of future leadership be built? What pedagogical, or andragogical constructs is relevant in modern times? And most importantly, how should academicians in universities, and employers in industry, absorb the changing realities, and readapt learning and work places?

Keywords: millennial, pedagogy, learning, skill gaps, leadership

Introduction

The millennial (defined here as those born after 1980) brings to fore a bundle of contradictions to their yesteryear parents and teachers. They are bred in a networked age with real time connectivity, where cellular phone and laptop is as much a necessity, as mineral water (enlarged hygiene factors in Maslow). They believe it's more important to get along, than be right. They are more exposed to the world through Facebook, social networks, and YouTube. Their connections to the outer world are without much constraint.

The millennials are more shaped by the fantasies of Harry Potter, and pop-culture of Michael Jackson. To them, life is a rush; multi-tasking; on the move; and restlessly hectic, intercepted with pizzas and pastas, as quick bite meals. Their feelings are expressed in smileys, and communications encapsulated in Three-Letter-Acronyms (TLAs).

The ways of learning of yesteryears may not be relevant to a millennial. To them, an instructor-led, chalk-and-talk pedagogy may spell boredom. They perceive sitting through the walls of a class room with unending flow of power point slides as a tryst with patience. A 70% mandatory attendance in classes for instance, can cause furious repugnance to a millennial. The question therefore is how to get over the hangover of the past and be open to make a paradigm shift. Can learning be fun? Can it be dealt in a social fabric of Facebook or Orkut? Can there be flexibility and freedom to choose a learning curriculum that empowers the learners to have a say in its content, approach, and delivery? Can learning truly become a voyage to discovery, often unpredictable and uncertain, yet fun to explore?

While the current focus country-wide is on bridging the skill gaps between academia and industry, very little attention is being given to the inherent strengths that millennials bring to the fore, and leveraging on them, both in academia, and the workplace. Our efforts seem to be rooted on how to tame youngsters to “our way of living and working” than acknowledge their special needs, and redesign our academic and workspaces to take advantage of their strengths.

This may mean, changing tack with regard to course design, delivery methods, and certifications in academia; as also, changing the workplace environment that best uses the millennials knowledge, skills, and attitudes. It is more a case of re-engineering our approach both to learning and working, that best suit millennials. This approach paper would limit its focus on the academia, and recommend new ways of millennial-centric learning, more in context of India.

Advantage India

In a world where demographic changes are rapidly occurring, India stands to an advantage, as against several developed western countries with regard to size of population in the age bracket of 25 years or less. India indeed stands amidst a window of opportunity created by the demographic dividend. (Chandrasekhar, Ghosh, & Roychowdhury, 2006). 58% of the population in India is reported to be less than 30 years (UN population database, 2010) which means, availability of a high-potential resource (millennials in current context) for employment in a knowledge society. Leveraging on this resource would require getting future corporate talent to be ready, not just with skills of the day, but for future challenges, and assignments. An agile, forward looking mindset is needed in academia to achieve this.

Building high caliber future-ready talent for at least 3 million people however, will need immediate corrective actions on five folds (NASSCOM Perspective 2020, 2009):

- Quality and scale of tertiary education
- Revising curriculum and faculty development
- Building centers of excellence at par with world standards
- Fueling the fever of entrepreneurship
- Building Intellectual property framework

Strategic Focus on Millennials

If millennials are going to form our future workforce, then it should naturally follow that our policies, methods, and processes must be millennial-centric, than historic. Prensky (2001) states, “today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach.” Prensky adds, “the single biggest problem facing education today is

that our current teachers, speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), and are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language.

Surely, our focus needs urgent change. The direction of effort is as important as speed and flexibility in a global context. Employment in future would know no borders, nor have corporate edifices as addresses. Anytime, anywhere, “any-many” would be the workplace of future! Obviously, the governing rules would change. And the academia of today should become the catalyst of this change.

The moot question to ask therefore is how is the persona of a millennial different than the baby-boomers of yesteryears? What changes, and transitional challenges, does a ‘generation next’ mind-set demand? And, what consequences would academia experience as a result of such changes? These are some of the questions that this paper attempts to address in the remainder part of discussions.

Enter the millennial world!

Simply put, millennials are the first generation to reach adulthood in the new millennium commenced in year 2000. They have been referred to by different names (Manz, 2010; Oblinger, 2005) as shown in Figure 1.

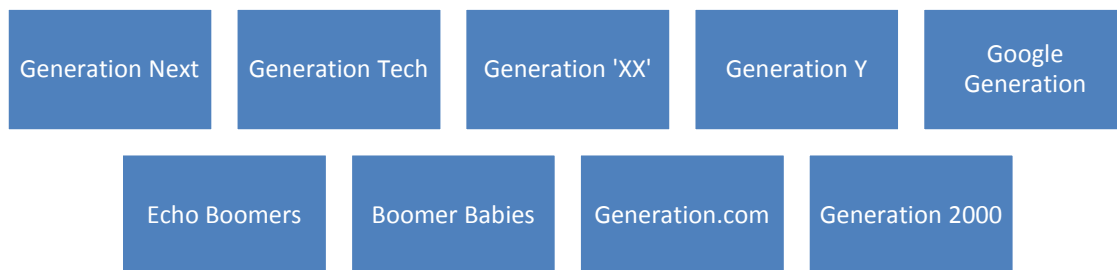


Figure 1: Millennial Identity in Different Names

The Millennial Persona

The millennials are the most protected and sheltered generation in history. As Woempner (2007) puts it, “they have ‘Baby on Board’ parents; the parents with video cameras to record the first steps, first words, first days at school, and first perfect attendance awards.” Being overly protected, also implies, these kids do not ‘rough up’ as much; may not have spent adequate time on playfields; may not have faced ‘real-life’ bullies; and therefore, in a sense, relatively wear a soft persona make-up compared to generations reared during world-war era.

Millennials are however, a confident lot. They have been raised by parents who believed in their self-esteem, and reinforced messages such as, ‘you are smart; leave no one behind.’ They would often question authority, and would engage into debate. Their bubbly energies and ability to withstand fierce competitions with enthusiasm, is an ideal prime mover that must be tapped by academia in a positive sense within their pedagogical constructs.

Average college students today spend less than 5000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10000 hours playing video games (Prensky, 2001). Computer games, email, the Internet, cell phones. and instant messaging are integral parts of their lives. The direct connotation of this facet to academia is that tomorrow’s students would tend to enjoy digital games and messaging, than read in print. For academia, it would mean recreating learning content through games, and delivering them via social digital networks. Virtual education is a promising way to go.

Being raised in a ‘net connected culture,’ millennials find it easy to collaborate and work in groups. In a sense, it satisfies their deep urge to be identified in social networks. Having a

good time is important to them. They are more “known” by the friends they keep on Facebook. Group activities and team work through digital forums, wikis, and blogs must therefore become the prime learning methodology for millennials. The millennials must be engaged with internet based research, and on-line course work. The academia must not shackle the millennials with the bricks.

Millennials are always connected on the move, anytime. 83% of millennials take their cell phones to bed (Zickuhr, 2010). They respond to text messages instantly. If millennials are to be reached, conventional notice boards in college campus may not be the right way. They ought to be SMSed and found active on Orkut. Their expectations from professors would be an open communication, and perhaps, with less parental interventions. Can the academia remain oblivious to these changes?

Millennials multitask and tend to mix fun with work. Multitasking, as a study on millennials confirm, reduces response time (Ophir, Nass & Wagner, 2009). Millennials can be impatient and need to see the fruits of their action instantly. They are more demanding consumers who expect more selectivity, personalization, and customization in their product and services (Sweeny, 2006). They are more goal and achievement oriented.

Surveys on media consumption suggest that the millennials are its main consumers. Interoperability, open source and open content, with loosely bound virtual communities would further accelerate, and increase the media consumption time in future. Its sphere of

influence is rapidly shifting to “My Space,” My Community.” Figure 2 succinctly depicts the salient characteristics of the millennials.

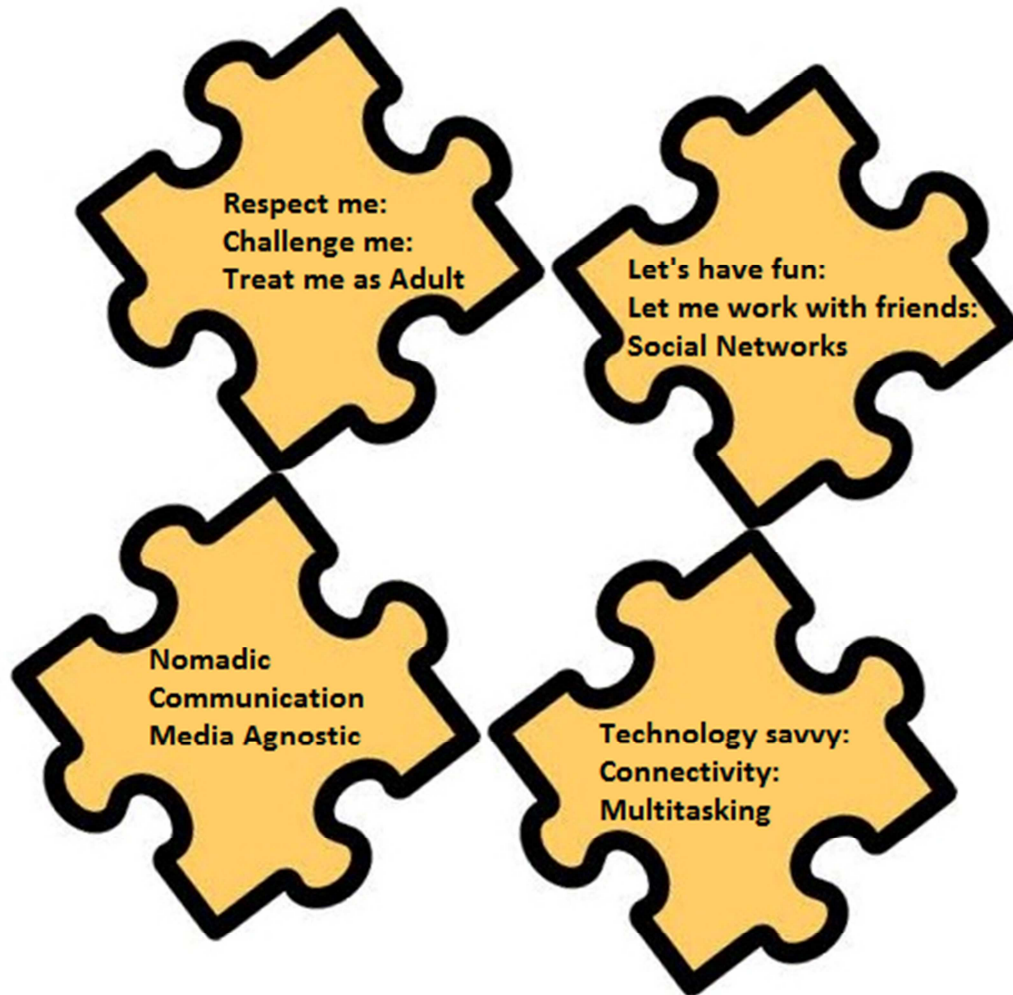


Figure 2: Characteristics of Millennials

Millennials however, are subject to more stress, pressure, and prone to burn-out faster. Becoming a digital being snatches away the joys of connecting with nature. There is no room for physical exercises, or time to play, and sweat, which can cause medical disorders. Childhood obesity is on rise. Lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, asthma, or thyroid related

disorders are increasing. Malnutrition related diseases are becoming more prevalent (National Family Health Survey, India, 2005-06).

So what kind of backpack learning kit a millennial carries? Dailey and Donnelli of Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, Park University, list the following:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| Cell phone | Unlimited texting |
| Digital camera | Instant messaging |
| Internet access | GPS navigation |
| On-line calendar / planner | MP3 player |
| Video player | Voice recorder |
| Games and downloadable apps | Address book |

A sample of social learning networks that will find increasing use in learning interventions of future is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Social Learning Networks of Future

Engaging the Millennial – A Paradigm Shift Proposition

Realizing that a millennial has significant virtual presence and craving for uninterrupted connectivity, the academic environs of future should largely be built on clicks, than on bricks, supported with mediated immersion, and social learning, based on virtual community groups. The emerging learning styles could include (Dede, 2005):

- Utilizing multiple media in simulation based virtual settings that encourages multitasking, and learning on the move
- Communal learning with active discussion groups, wikis, and blogs
- Blended experiential learning, guided mentoring, and collective reflection
- Non-linear, self-paced presentation through interactive play
- Co-design of learning experiences personalized to individual needs and preferences

Learning in the coming decades would largely be shaped by technology, which includes:

- The ubiquitous “desk-top,” “lap-top,” and “palm-top” interface that would connect millennial students to experts, anywhere, anyplace, anytime, enabling virtual collaborations and mentoring relationships.
- Multi User Virtual Environment (MUVE) interfaces, and the Second Life world of avatars, digital artifacts, and computer-based agents
- Mobile wireless devices such as gaming devices, cell phones, MP3-MP4 players, and PDAs.

From a pedagogical perspective, millennials are more amenable to group based activity, which augurs well (if properly tapped) for their future workplace experience. It is however

ironical to note from a recent survey of MBA fresh hires (ISOS & Westat, 2010) that, while 92% employers rated team work as an important attribute in new hire, only 28.3% were found to be rated as excellent or very good. This only purports the argument that sufficient team based learning opportunities are missing in current academic pursuits, and more weightage is given to competition and individual excellence, than collaboration.

Another dimension of pedagogy is to allow the students take the ownership for their learning and growth. The role of a teacher as a facilitator cannot be over-emphasized. The “sage on the stage” syndrome of current educational system must change. Every module of learning must be seen as a project management exercise where resources, and time, must be managed and monitored by the students. Quoting from ISOS survey (2010) mentioned above, project management is seen a big weak link, with expectation from new hire pitted at 67.3%, while only 17.7% were actually demonstrating them with an excellent or very good rating. Heutagogy (self-determined learning) as an extension of pedagogy should be seriously considered in academic institutions imparting professional programs such as MBA.

Case-study approach with realism has been in vogue for several years now. Harvard has been seen as a pioneer of this approach, as also story-centered curriculum of Roger Schank (2007) that emphasizes on “learning by doing.” This pedagogical approach provides an effective method to embed realism through role plays that utilizes the strengths that millennials inherently bring to academic campuses. Nemoto & Suzuki (2009) have applied

these principles to an on-line graduate program, and their findings highlight the adaptability issues related to running on-line programs.

Millennials are turned off with boring, structured, and bookish assignment submissions. On the contrary, millennials exhibit the “challenge me” attitude. The kind of assignments they would enjoy doing must have a blend of entertainment with excitement. Therefore, their assignments must be tailored to adopting new ideas, backed with experiential group-based learning, in tune with current fad, which draws their interest to easily accept them. MBA students for instance, could be asked to undertake a group-based submission to write a business proposal to a prospective sponsor for start-up funds. The activity could also include design of a splash page for a future website, and /or 15 second radio campaign highlighting the unique selling proposition of their proposal. Such assignments could be then hosted on a wiki, where their proposal could receive several comments and feedback from diverse population, even those, not directly connected with the university course.

Millennials like to be respected and treated like adults. They would gladly accept responsibility for their actions, and outcomes; given the right stimulus, and motivation. Our academic environs often fail to take advantage of this critical learning dimension. Why should students, especially at the university level, be given structured assignments? Why should they be given “university specified deadlines” which would seem as imposed irritants to them? Instead, why couldn’t a professor (the author prefers to call them as academic leads), specify a loosely structured requirement, just like a client does in the business world, and allow the students to submit a “request for proposal (RFP)” which can

be reviewed, and refined, both by the professor (client), and peers (student group). The RFP could be followed by agreed deliverables and timelines that could be negotiated between the client and students, along with acceptable quality metrics. The students would then perceive their assignments as a real-life project, to be delivered by them to a client, and thus learn to manage their critical resources, taking responsibility for their product or services. They would also learn negotiation skills as part of learning process, as well as, learn to communicate appropriately through proposal and review reports. Failure to deliver the product, or service, in agreed timelines and quality rating, could be seen as breach in agreement and penalties imposed, as would happen in a real life business world. The role of professors here would be more in the mould of a mentor, than teacher, and the process of learning would be similar to participative consultancy.

Millennials also detest rigid and overly structured schedules. They look for flexibility in the learning environment, communicating without undue barriers, and choose SMS, chats or forums, as mediums. Therefore, academic environment must provide students, a choice in selection of electives, learning hours, assignment turning-in schedules, and even plan their curriculum. BITS Pilani, a prestigious private university in India, had implemented such flexibilities as early as 1970s, where students had the freedom to choose their courses, faculty and design their own time tables. Optional free electives at BITS ranged from “Appreciation of Indian Music,” to “Comparative Religion” even for students of science, engineering and management.

Table 1 provides a map of perceived strengths of millennials with suggested learning and communication mediums that can be used for design, and delivery of academic curriculum.

Table 1: Mapping Millennial Strengths with Learning Strategy		
Perceived Strengths	Learning Medium	Communication Preferences
Technology Savvy	Networked multimedia	Electronic
Socially Networked, Team Oriented	Group Based Interventions	Informal, friendly
Multitasking	Connected Multimedia	Short, terse, objective
Doers, Optimistic, Powerhouses	Experiential, Activity Driven	Specific, bullet points, positive, feedback
Value Diversity	Wiki-Blog based	Electronic, Respectable
Overachievers, Confident	Structured	Goal-driven, feedback
Street Smart, Pragmatic, Instant Gratification	Game Based, Problem Solving	Motivational and enthusiastic
Civic Minded	Community Based Activity	Respectful
Innovators	Creative, Open, Loosely Structured	Positive and Open

Conclusion

The millennial effect has already begun to impact academic campuses and workplace. Technology and value push has permeated the social fabric, and affects the way we learn, relate, and live, in a knowledge society. While the principles of becoming a “good human being” will not change, but what will, are the methods and rules that govern human behaviour which are contextual. The academicians, and the workplace owners of future, should accept and welcome these changes and create a new energetic society that would harness the potential and strengths of millennials. And these strengths can be tempered and reinforced to suit the contextual and domain fitment, both in personal and professional lives of individuals, and thus meet the collective aspirations of society.

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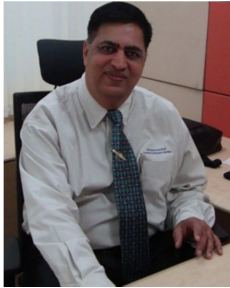
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About the Author



Shekhar Murthy is the President of IIC Academy at Visakhapatnam, India, and has over 29 years of demonstrated leadership experience. He has held coveted positions in areas of learning and development, operations, inspection, quality assurance, and research and development. His range of tenures includes, Indian Navy, Enercon, Apex CoVantage, Satyam, Lanco and private engineering colleges.

Shekhar has a deep rooted passion towards learning and development and has set up world class learning centers in India and International, apart from being a professor and examiner at Pune University. He has written several papers on holistic lifelong learning, e-learning, just-in-time techniques adapted to learning, pedagogy, experiential learning, and presented them in International forums. Learning is his passion, and transforming lives – his credo.

An alumnus of BITS, Pilani; IIT Kharagpur; IGNOU; U-21 Singapore & Harvard Publishing; Shekhar holds a Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering (BITS); Master's in Systems Engineering & Management (IIT), M.Sc. in Physics (BITS), MBA, Ops Management (IGNOU), and Global Business Leadership (U-21).

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