

Engaging Millennial Students in Class Discussions

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Problem Statement

Students in the Millennial Generation (anyone born after 1982) grew up in an environment that places a priority on individuality (Roehling, Lee Vander Kooi, Dykema, Quisenberry, & Vandlen, 2010). Information, entertainment, and social interactions are at these students' fingertips. Research on the Millennial Generation implies that these students have different educational expectations and needs (Howe & Strauss, 2003). As a result, different approaches to engaging Millennial students in class discussions may be necessary. Compared to recent generations, Millennials are easily bored, crave variety, are self-directed, have high self-esteem, are collaborative and team-oriented, crave interaction, and are ethnically diverse (Oblinger, 2003; Twenge, 2006). Since Millennials enjoy working in groups and have a low tolerance for boredom, traditional classroom lectures may not be as effective with this generation.

Classroom discussions, if facilitated appropriately, could help meet the goals of this collaborative and inquisitive generation. Faculty, however, frequently comment that most traditional-aged students (ages 18-23) remain silent during class discussion (Roehling et al., 2010). As an academic advisor at Owens Community College, I frequently hear faculty share their frustrations regarding how to best engage Millennial students in class discussion. They are perplexed by how to create an environment where Millennial students feel comfortable speaking up and stating their opinions and ideas.

Many faculty members at colleges and universities value active learning as part of their teaching pedagogy (Swinicki & McKeachie, 2011). Active learning refers to techniques used to encourage students to do more than simply listen to a lecture (McKinney, 2005). By

participating in active learning activities students are required to discover, process, and apply information.

One of the most common teaching methods for active learning is class discussion (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). Class discussion help students construct their own knowledge, understanding, and meaning. When students think about what they are learning and have the opportunity to talk about it by explaining, summarizing, or questioning they are more likely to remember the content when they need to use it in the future. Participation in class discussions also helps students focus better and use their critical thinking skills to answer questions, evaluate, assess, make decisions, grapple with key issues, solve problems, defend their choices, etc. Getting students to learn to engage in an exchange of ideas also helps them get intellectually excited (Bain, 2004).

Minimal research exists on how to specifically engage Millennial students in class discussion. Previous research on how to engage the Millennial Generation in class discussions has focused on medium liberal arts college where the majority of participants in the study were white and female (Roehling et al., 2010). The authors felt that their recommendations for engaging Millennials in class discussions were broadly relevant to other student populations and institution types since their students' responses were consistent with characteristics associated with the Millennial Generation. Millennial students attending community colleges frequently take classes with non-traditional students (students over the age of 23) and students from diverse backgrounds. Often, classes at community colleges have smaller student enrollment and different classroom norms for class participation and unique conditions that facilitate and stifle discussions may exist at various types of institutions.

As a result of this study, faculty at community colleges will better understand Millennial students' perceptions of class discussions. In addition, they will gain insight on how to create a classroom atmosphere that increases Millennial students' participation in classroom discussion and thus, enhances student learning and development.

Purpose of the Research

To examine the challenge of engaging Millennial students in class discussions, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore Millennial students' perceptions of class discussions at a community college in the Midwest with a diverse student population. Information will be gathered through one-on-one interviews and small focus groups.

Research Questions

This study will seek to identify the following research questions:

Central Question:

How do students of the Millennial Generation think that faculty at a large community college can help to facilitate more participation in class discussion?

Subquestions:

In what ways do students of the Millennial Generation find classroom discussion useful and of value?

How do student of the Millennial Generation think that faculty can hinder participation in class discussions?

In what situations to students of the Millennial Generation feel most and least comfortable participating in class discussions?

Literature Review

General Characteristics of the Millennial Generation

Students of the Millennial Generation tend to believe in equality and are used to having easy access to interaction, entertainment, and information, resulting in a low tolerance for boredom (Roehling et al., 2010). The Millennial Generation, however, is very sensitive to criticism and reluctant to share if they feel uninformed or unsure of how their comments will be received. Students of the Millennial Generation are described as special, pressured, sheltered, confident, achieving, optimistic, and accepting of authority (Wilson, 2004). They are also pressured, rule followers, and team-oriented.

Benefits of Class Discussion for Millennial Generation

Given the characteristics of Millennial students, classroom discussions are an excellent learning tool for this generation because they offer variety and allow students to share their thoughts and feelings (Roehling, et al, 2010). McKeachie (2002) argued that class discussion are superior to lectures in student retention of information after a course ends; transfer of knowledge to new situations, development of critical thinking skills, and motivation for further learning. To promote learning, students need to be engaged and involved (Wilson, 2004).

Past research revealed that Millennial students found three main reasons why classroom discussions are useful (Roehling et al., 2010). First, students shared that class discussions made learning more active. Students reported that discussions helped them focus better and keep from zoning out. Second, Millennials believed that class discussions resulted in a better understanding of the course material and provided a means for them to reach their own conclusions. Students in the Millennial Generation want to think for themselves rather than simply accepting what

authority figures tell them (Twenge, 2006). Third, Millennial students believed that class discussion promoted an understanding of different perspectives. Millennials are the most diverse generation of students in the history of the United States (Howe & Strauss, 2003) and they believe that everyone's voices should be heard and treated with respect (Twenge, 2006).

Blogging, the act of writing one's opinions and thoughts and posting them online for all to read, was popularized by this generation and is an example of this belief in action (Roehling, 2010).

Class discussions are another way Millennial students can voice their own thoughts and hear the opinions of others.

Factors that Impact Millennial Students' Participation in Class Discussion

It is not uncommon for students and faculty to experience anxiety regarding class discussions and both tend to feel uncomfortable when there is low participation in class discussions (Roehling et al., 2010). If students value classroom discussions and feel that it is painful when no one participates, why do professors have a difficult time engaging Millennial students in class discussions? In past research, Millennial students identified the situations in which they feel most and least comfortable engaging in class discussions, arguing their point of view, and challenging the viewpoint of another (Roehling et al., 2010). Class norms for participation influenced students' desire to participate in class discussions. Millennial students shared that participation was shaped by the professor's attitude, the professor's ability to moderate the discussion, the classroom atmosphere, and students' behaviors and attitudes.

Although Millennial students want to speak for themselves, they have tremendous respect for authority figures (Howe & Strauss, 2003; Oblinger, 2003). Earning the approval of faculty is important to them. In order to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions, Millennial students must perceive that their instructors are open to students' opinions (Roehling et al.,

2010). In addition, they must perceive that their grades and their professors' opinions of them will not be negatively impacted by what they share in the class discussions.

In comparison to other generations, Millennials were raised in a child-centered environment, where high self-esteem was valued and children were taught that each person is "special" (Howe & Strauss, 2003). Because of this, Millennials are not used to others disagreeing with them. In addition, they are not used to receiving criticism and are hypersensitive to being openly corrected by others (Twenge, 2006). Research shows that when professors openly disagreed with Millennial students the students tended to interpret it as a personal attack (Roehling et al., 2010). Most students also said they felt more comfortable expressing their views when they did not know what their professor's stand was on an issue.

Enthusiasm is an important characteristic of the best college teachers (Bain, 2004). For the Millennial Generation that is susceptible to boredom, this quality is even more critical (Roehling et al., 2010). Professors often compete with cyberspace to keep the attention of students who choose to text or surf the web if they do not feel stimulated by the classroom environment. When students perceive that their professor is less than enthusiastic about the subject matter, they more likely to decide not to participate in class discussions.

Millennial students tend to prefer professors who provided the class with intentional opportunities to get to know one another (Roehling et al., 2010). Familiarity led to an environment where students felt comfortable sharing. Students' perceptions of the friendliness of their classmates influenced their willingness to speak up in class discussions, whereas their perception of their instructors was less of a factor in their participation (Fassinger, 1997).

Millennial students are team-oriented and fear being judged by their peers (Roehling et al., 2010). If they do not think their opinion matches the mainstream, they may refrain from

sharing. Also, students may be reluctant to participate in class discussions if they feel unprepared or they lack an understanding of the course content.

Millennials often pressured to perform due to high school teachers and parents reinforcing the idea that you must perform well if you want to get into a good college or university (Atkinson, 2004). As a result, they tend to be very driven by grades. They may feel that class discussions are not meaningful and are of little value because they are not receiving any type of external reinforcement for participation (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). Despite this pressure, Millennials are quite confident in their ability to achieve and believe that they can shape their own future and attain success (Atkinson, 2004). When Millennials encounter college, they often face an environment that now puts an emphasis on working as an individual rather than within a group. The primary instructional method is lecture and group work may not play a major factor in their courses. Students also need to recognize that memorizing and cramming are not effective in producing good results. Reading and creating study notes and engaging in active learning activities such as class discussion and debates are things that Millennial students will be expected to do. Students may look for more direction from faculty in the classroom because they are used to their parents and their high school teachers providing it. Professors are wise to consider explaining the purpose of engaging in class discussions early in the semester so that students understand that participation is an expectation that the professor values.

General Recommendations for Facilitating Class Discussions

Ezzedeen (2008) stated that facilitating productive class discussions is one of the most challenging responsibilities for college educators and shared with educators several recommendations for facilitating class discussions. The recommendations included, among others, setting the physical stage for conversational learning, recognizing and striving to

overcome initial student resistant, using the grading system to support discussion, recognizing student differences, choosing relevant and interesting topics, and adopting current reading materials, and carefully balancing the roles of teacher and conversational participant. These recommendations are meant to encourage teachers across subjects to engage students in class discussions.

Class size and the physical setting of the classroom affect conversational learning (Ezzedeen, 2008). Students may perceive a stronger sense of equality and community when chairs are rearranged from rows to a circular format where students can all see each other. Breaking down larger classes into smaller discussion groups is also helpful. In contrast, students in small classes might feel like they always have to participate so students could take turns leading discussions.

Professors may find that students are reluctant to participate because they lack confidence or fear appearing unintelligent (Ezzedeen, 2008). One suggestion is for professors to discuss on the first day of class the importance of conversation in students' everyday lives. As a result of the discussion, students will conclude that they learn much from talking and listening to others.

The class reward system should be designed to support class discussion (Ezzedeen, 2008), but professors must balance motivating conversation through the grading system and encouraging students to enjoy it intrinsically. In addition, the grading system must not punish students who are reluctant to participate for cultural or personal reasons.

It is important for college educators to recognize the individual differences among students (Ezzedeen, 2008). In general, non-traditional students participate more willingly in class discussions because they have more experience and feel less of a power difference from their instructors (Weaver & Qi, 2005). The connection between gender and participation is

mixed, but teachers do play a role in encouraging the participation of females (Salter & Persaud, 2003). Fassinger (1995) found that men participate more in class discussions. At the beginning of a course, educators should praise students who readily answer questions and debate viewpoints as a means of encouraging other students to do the same (Ezzedeen, 2008). Teachers should stress the importance of everyone's contributions.

Class discussions do not translate into learning without students having some sort of prior familiarity with the topic (Ezzedeen, 2008). All topics may not be equally appealing, and professors can ask students at the beginning of the semester what their goals are for the class and select course readings that students' find intriguing. Students learn best and are more likely to engage when they care about the course material and it is of personal interest to them (Bain, 2004). When students familiarize themselves with course material by reading, this prior preparation boosts students' confidence and increases their desire to participate (Weaver & Qi, 2005).

Research suggests that students are less likely to participate in class discussions when they view faculty as experts (Weaver & Qi, 2005). It is important for professors to establish their role as a facilitator as opposed to an expert on the first day of class (Ezzedeen, 2008). One study showed that faculty-student interaction produced the largest effect on student participation (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Interacting with students during class breaks or after class is one way for faculty to foster a trusting relationship with students.

Also, Millennials have a propensity toward informal classroom settings (Twenge, 2006). Research indicates that students feel less comfortable sharing in classes that feel more formal where the professor does not call on them by name or calls on them randomly (Roehling et al., 2010).

Course design can have the largest impact on class participation (Fassinger, 1995). Efforts to develop students' confidence are likely to promote more participation in class. Having discussions that help to develop empathy for other students can also increase involvement.

A Shift from a Teaching Paradigm to a Learning Paradigm

Educators can create environments to increase student learning and engagement (Wilson, 2004). Among the many recommendations for improving teaching and learning, Barr and Tagg (1995) suggested a paradigm shift from a teaching emphasis to a learning emphasis. Rather than delivering instruction, the mission of the learning paradigm is to produce learning. Instead of faculty being primarily lecturers, they are designers of learning activities and environments.

Teaching and learning are influenced by a variety of social factors, such as gender, race, age, and social class of students and their instructors, the interactions patterns between faculty and students that affects who participates and how, and how faculty use or share their authority (Wilson, 2004). By paying attention to these social forces, professors can intentionally work to foster student learning and engagement in class discussions.

A Need for Further Research

Class discussion is one of the most effective tools professors can use because students become aware of a variety of views and it allows them to relate to their peers (Ezzedeen, 2008). That being said, as mentioned earlier, class discussions can be anxiety provoking for both faculty and students. Very little literature exists regarding how best to specifically engage Millennial students in class discussions. Hirschy and Wilson (2002) shared that Millennial students may choose not to participate in class discussions because they are frustrated with domineering peers, fear appearing dumb, have low confidence, be shy, arrive unprepared, be uncomfortable with the discussion topic, be sleep deprived, not understand the material in the way that it was presented,

perceive that the professor does not want discussion, or feel anxiety about being singled out as a member representative of a certain group. Many of the reasons are the responsibility of the student, but with others, an instructor's intervention may encourage a classroom environment that supports students engaging in class discussions.

In summary, the Millennial Generation is characteristically different from previous generations and educators may need to try new approaches to engage these students and help them to grow and develop. Class discussions seem well-suited for Millennials who thrive on group work, variety, and the opportunity to share their ideas and listen to the opinions of others. As educators, we must be willing adopt new ways to encourage participation of Millennial students in class discussions. In doing so, student learning and engagement will be enhanced.

Research Design

The research design that I will use for this study is an emerging grounded theory design because it will allow me to generate a broad theory from the data I collect about Millennial students' perceptions of class discussions and what makes Millennial students more or less likely to engage in class discussions. A grounded theory design will also allow me to explore if Millennial students find class discussions useful, and if so, under what circumstances they do find them useful. A grounded theory design will allow also help explain the process of how Millennial students engage in class discussions and the theory that I generate will actually be "grounded" in the data that I collect. As a result, the theory will be specific to the actual situation of engaging Millennial students in class discussion at a large community college where classes are often a mix of both traditional and non-traditional students. I will examine the data and develop and refine the categories and compare the data with emerging categories to create a theory to explain how Millennial students engage in class discussions.

Method

Participants

Maximal variation sampling will be utilized to identify twenty-five full or part-time students from Owens Community College in Perrysburg, Ohio based on age, race, and gender. First, the study will include students who are between the ages of 18 and 23. In addition, to ensure that the sample is representative of the diverse student population at Owens Community College, students will be identified for the study based on gender and race to get a final sample that is approximately a 50-50 split of males and females, and is approximately 80% White, 15% African American, and 5% Hispanic.

Data Sources

For this qualitative study, data will be collected through individual face-to-face interviews. In addition, as a follow-up to the interview, students will have the opportunity to provide additional feedback via e-mail about their thoughts on class discussions. This follow-up e-mail will allow students time to reflect on the questions that were initially asked during the interview and provide an opportunity for them to share additional information. Face-to-face interviews will allow the student to establish a rapport with the interviewer. In addition, if professors are correct in their assumption that Millennial students are not comfortable participating in class discussions, one-on-one interviews may allow the researcher to gain information from the student that they may have been unable to obtain through a focus group discussion. I also feel that the one-on-one interviews will be better than focus groups because they will help to ensure that students are not influenced by what other students are saying. I will ask Millennial students about ways in which they find class discussions useful and of value. I will also ask the students how they think faculty at Owens Community College can help facilitate greater participation in class discussions or hinder class discussions. Lastly, I will ask

students to describe situations in which they feel most and least comfortable participating in class discussions. The follow-up e-mail sent to students after their face-to-face interview will be open-ended and simply thank them for taking the time to interview and request that they provide any additional information about the questions that they were asked face-to-face about engaging in class discussions.

Procedures

The face-to-face interviews will be recorded and a team of five researchers will analyze the data and develop codes to identify statements shared during the face-to-face interviews. Each statement will be coded separately by three researchers. Next, the three researchers will meet and discuss the codes until 100% agreement is reached. Then, data will be compared and categorized. After the face-to-face interviews, participants will receive an e-mail thanking them for their participation in the interview and asking them to share any additional feedback or insights on their perceptions of class discussions, using the same questions they were asked during the face-to-face interviews. Again, researchers will take these comments, code them, and assign them to categories. Lastly, a theory will be generated to explain the process of Millennial students engaging in class discussions at a community college and what their perceptions are of class discussions.

Validity

Validity is an important consideration in any research study. According to Maxwell (1992), validity in qualitative research really has to do with the data and conclusions from using a method in a specific context for a certain purpose. Validity is always dependent on the perspective that a particular account is based on. For this study, it is important to remember that an emerging grounded theory design will be utilized and that researchers will conduct face-to-

face interviews and code the statements from the interviews based on their own perspectives. How a researcher in qualitative research interprets what they see, hear, find, etc. is a factor. In this study, we tried to control for accuracy in the account and interpretation of the interviews and e-mail responses by having three researchers individually code the interview statements and e-mail responses and then meet until 100% agreement was reached among the three researchers on the code to assign to the statements. Maxwell (1992) described these concerns as descriptive validity and interpretive validity. An observer's own description and interpretation of what they witnessed may be different from what another person observed. People are socialized differently and use their own language to describe and interpret what they saw in the context of their own knowledge and experiences.

Because of the grounded theory design, it is also important to consider what Maxwell (1992) called theoretical validity, which refers to an account's validity as an actual theory of some central phenomenon. In this study, the researchers will assign categories from the data and build relationships among the categories to construct a theory of why Millennial students engage in class discussions, as well as what their perceptions are of class discussions.

Lastly, it is important to consider a threat to validity that Maxwell (1992) called generalizability. This qualitative study will take place at a large community college in northern Ohio with a diverse student population. Students in smaller, less diverse campus environments are likely to have different norms for class participation and different conditions that enhance or stifle class discussions. Therefore, caution must be taken if one tries to generalize the findings to other colleges or universities.

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