

Generational Learning Styles



by Julie Coates

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On the cover: Two Florida high school girls on a train going home from school. Michelle and Doris listen to a song on an iPod (in pink) together, while Michelle also uses her cell phone. The two are also talking with another schoolfriend (not shown) across the aisle. The photo, taken by Julie Coates, illustrates how Generation Y communicates both face-to-face, and online, often at the same time.

In 1980 something happened that had never occurred before through the span of four and a half million millennia. On January 1, 1980, the first member of the Millennial Generation or Generation Y was born. While that event passed with no more notice than the birth of any child, it meant that exactly 18 years later we would live in a world different from anything we had known before.

For the first time in history, there are now four generations of adults living, working and learning within the same society. It sets a tone for the explosion of change that society faces in the 21st century.

For the first time, there are four generations of adults raising families, going to work, going to school. The day of the multi-age classroom is here. The issues of how to manage diverse generations in the workplace are upon us.

Generational Learning Styles is a pioneering work intended to provide you with guidelines for meeting the challenges of multiple generations in school, work and society.

For trainers, teachers at all levels, faculty, human resource professionals and anyone interested in generations and in learning styles. After reading *Generational Learning Styles*, you will be more creative and successful in your own teaching and work.

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Acknowledgments

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Dedication

To Helen and Y. A. Taylor,
the greatest parents in the Greatest Generation.

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Introduction

Most scientists accept that the age of the earth is about 4.5 billion years, but in 1980, something happened that had never occurred before through the span of four and a half million millennia. On January 1, 1980, the first member of the Millennial Generation or Generation Y was born, and while that event passed with no more notice than the birth of any child, it meant that exactly 18 years later we would live in a world different from anything we had known before. For the first time in history, in 1998, there were four generations of adults living, working, and learning within the same society. This has never occurred before in our history, and it sets a tone for the explosion of change that society faces in the 21st century. For the first time, there are four generation of adults raising families, going to work, going to school. The day of the multi-age classroom is here, and the issues of how to manage diverse generations in the workplace are upon us. This book is intended to provide some guidance in meeting those challenges.

These are times like no others. It is possible to sit on a park bench in some cities and communicate via wireless Internet connections with people around the globe. Grandparents can view their newly born grandchild online within hours of its birth. Young people can maintain relationships with friends in many countries and from a wide range of cultures. Technology has changed the world.

On a more mundane level, a high school dropout with access to the Internet can access the formula for finding the area of a pyramid in order to use the information to construct a box for his car stereo. Youth at risk can learn about probability by researching the sexual behavior of Genghis Khan or, out of curiosity, determine the volume of a newly constructed water tank for their community.

These changes in the nature of information and the availability of information are staggering, but they are further complicated by the demographic changes that have occurred at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries. Not only are there more people, but there are more adults in every age cohort. For the first time in history, educators and trainers are faced with teaching and training adults whose ages range from their late teens and early twenties to their eighties. Such a range of ages has never been common in the classrooms, training rooms and workplaces of the past, and this demographic reality presents new challenges to educators, trainers and managers. As the retirement age moves toward age 70, it is likely that there will be an increasing number of older adults in the classroom and the workplace. It is essential that educators and managers learn the skills to teach and manage effectively in an age-diverse world.

This book is a tool for to help meet this challenge. It contains information on each generation, with practical strategies to improve both teaching and communication across the generations.

The information provided here is intended to guide you to a better understanding of how to successfully teach students of different ages. The goal is to provide you with information that you can use to understand the outlook and context within which people of different generations approach learning, so that you can be more creative and successful in your own teaching.

Keep in mind that every individual is different. That does not, however, mean that it is impossible for people with certain shared cultural experiences to develop similar sets of behaviors and outlooks. As much as we are individuals, we also share much in common with our peers. Thus, if we assert that baby boomers are avid learners, it does not mean that *every* baby boomer is an avid learner. We all know individuals who are baby boomers and who are not at all interested in pursuing additional learning opportunities.

It means that, statistically, baby boomers are more likely to engage in learning activities than their predecessors, and/or that more baby boomers are likely to pursue independent learning interests than other groups, or that a significant number of adults in this category say that learning and education are important to them, etc.

Likewise, if we say that Millenials are more likely to have good manners than Gen Xers, it does not mean that all Millenials are polite or

that all Gen Xers are rude. It simply means that certain behaviors are more typical of each group than of others. I raise this point because I do not wish any of you to become frustrated when we must, for the purposes of discussion, make certain broad characterizations. This is unavoidable, and I encourage you to remember that our broad statements are based on behaviors that have been analyzed and measured for statistically significant presence among population groups.

To fully understand the implications of societal change upon generations and upon learning preferences, it is necessary to consider a wide array of forces that impinge upon people's lives, and how these forces change with time. In order to understand these better, we will explore a variety of cultural phenomena including social, economic, demographic, technological, and scientific, as well as educational — for it is the collective influence of all these societal forces that results in the changes across generations that are the focus of this book.

Chapter 1: Who are the Generations?

There is debate about this question. The baby boom earned its name when the birth rate soared above 3.5 million per year in the United States and above 4 million for several years. The Baby Bust (more commonly called Generation X) was that cohort that followed the Baby Boom. While many demographers and marketers have different definitions of just what years comprise each generation, in this book the definition will be based on birth rate.

It is absolutely the case that there is wide variation within each generation, and that members of generational cohorts are not social, philosophical, educational, or economic clones of each other. It is also true that generations tend to merge into each other so that the youngest Baby Boomers may have more in common with Generation Xers than with leading edge Boomers. In fact, because of this very phenomenon, we have Generation Jones. This segment of the Baby Boom generation was named by Johathan Pontell, now in his mid-forties. It applies to that segment of boomers (the largest segment, by the way) born between 1954 and 1965. Numbering about 53 million, it represents about seventy-five percent of the total Boomer population (Williams, 2002).

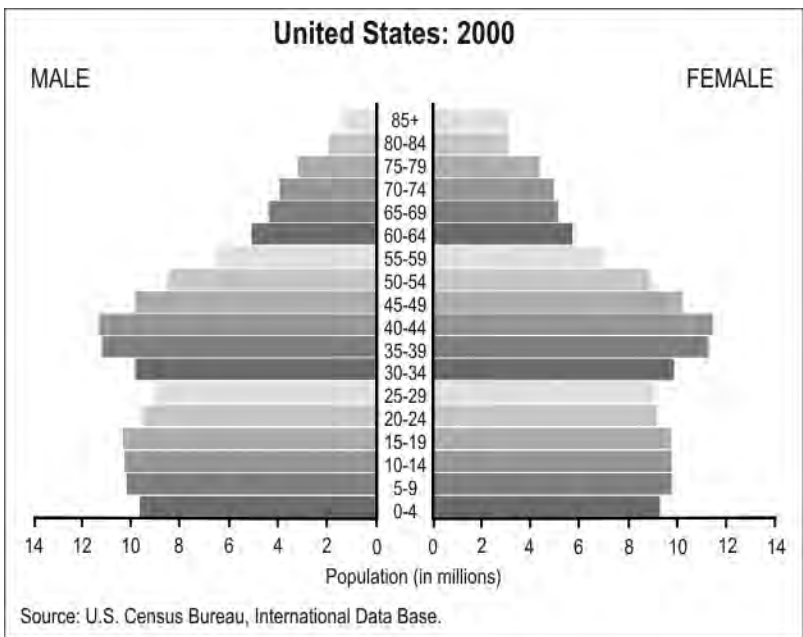
“Too young to be a Boomer and too old to be a Gen Xer,” Pontell created a new generation. Undeniably a part of the Baby Boom, Generation Jones represents a quintessentially Boomer philosophy... make yourself different, keep yourself young, make yourself stand out from the crowd. This reality reflects the importance of acknowledging both

major values and trends that tend to exist within generations while also demonstrating that change is constantly occurring and evolving. Further, it illustrates quite profoundly that there are segments and sub-segments of every cohort. The intent of this book is not to examine the minute psychographic changes that occur within generational cohorts, but rather to explore the major consistencies in values and behavior that guide larger societal trends.

Using this principle as a guideline, we define the generations as follows. Note that the two oldest generations were named “after the fact,” i.e., until we began naming the generations with the Boomers, there was no name to identify generational shifts.

- **The Veteran Generation** — 1920-1933 (WWII Veterans, larger cohort)
- **The Silent Generation** — 1933-1946 (Depression babies, smaller cohort)
- **Baby Boom** — 1946-1964 (birth rate above 3.5 million/year to 4 million/year)
- **Generation X** — 1964-1980 (birth rate below 3.5 million/year)
- **Generation Y** — 1980-2000* (birth rate above 3.5 million to 4 million/year)
- **Generation Z** — 2000+ (birth rate consistently above 4 million/year)

The chart on the following page provides a graphic image of the population distribution in the United States in 2000. The Baby Boom is clearly evident as the large bulge in the middle of the chart. Generation X is the smaller cohort just below the bulge, and Generation Y can be seen as the numbers within younger cohort increases. It is interesting to note that the population of older adults is growing — and that as it ages, the population becomes increasingly female.



By 2025, the population will begin to look quite different. The Baby Boomers will be well into their retirement years, and while their numbers will still be large, they will comprise an overall smaller percentage of the total population. This demonstrates how generational/age diversity is here to stay, and that developing communication, management, and teaching tools to address this demographic reality are something that must happen now. If we look at the demographic profile projected for 2050, this becomes even more apparent. Into the middle of the century and beyond, we will be teaching in age-diverse classrooms.

By 2050, the population pyramid will look like the population beehive. The youngest Baby Boomers will be in their mid to late 80s and age segmentation will be a constant in society, rather than a novel situation to which society must adjust.

