



BOOMERS AND MILLENNIALS: VIVE LA DIFFÉRENCE

How to mesh generational styles in a learning community

By Suzette Lovely

Teacher beliefs have a profound impact on instructional practice. According to Pajares (1992), beliefs determine how much effort a teacher puts forth and how long he or she will persist in the face of adversity. Many beliefs can be traced back to experiences teachers had when they were in school. Those early recollections of school events tend to be idealized and can taint perceptions

of later events. Reluctance to alter those beliefs is not only a result of age and career stage, but also a consequence of collective memories and nostalgia.

A major challenge in learning community design is creating a culture of collaboration among teachers with different beliefs. While recent research has examined the importance of shared beliefs (e.g. attitudes and values) in a learning community, the relationship between generational ideals and collaborative practices in learning communities is relatively unexplored territory. Although the popular press has frequently discussed generational differences in

the workplace, stereotypes can lead to misunderstandings. For a learning community to work together smoothly and efficiently, members need to understand their differences so they can teach and learn together.

GENERATIONAL IMPRINT

A generation is defined as an identifiable group that shares birth years, age location, and significant events at critical junctures of development (Corsten, 1999; Kopperschmidt, 2000). Within each group, there is a sense of sameness, social identity, and reciprocal existence. Although there are no fixed boundaries to establish where one generation begins and another ends, new cohorts are said to emerge every 18 to 24 years. Generations become forever linked by the music, media, defining moments, and cultural norms of the times in which they grow up.

While the concept of a generation has various interpretations within the scientific community, scholars agree that beliefs, attitudes, and memories from adolescence provide a lens through which adult experiences are filtered. Although some people will fall outside the norm, generational effects remain fairly stable over a lifetime to form an imprint that distinguishes one group from another. When combined with pedagogical knowledge, a teacher's generational imprint can have a lasting impact on professional commitment, self-efficacy, and shared responsibility.

AN ABIDING FAITH IN EDUCATION

For baby boomers, who began teaching in the 1970s and early 1980s, expectations and career ideals are different from those who started teaching more recently. Generally speaking, baby boomers are a conservative group. They have continuously resisted reforms that compel them to give up their autonomy or engage in collaborative work (Johnson, 2004; Little, 1982). This group pursued teaching for distinct reasons. Teaching was considered a noble line of work. Socialization into the culture of schools reinforced these beliefs, including this generation's "abiding faith" in the promise of public education (Nieto, 2001, p. 10). Beyond that, limited career options for women and minorities drew baby boomers into teaching in large numbers. Intentional or not, closed doors to other occupations provided a "hidden subsidy" to America's schoolchildren (Johnson, 2004, p. 19). Women and minorities possessed remarkable talent and commitment. In addition, the structure of public schools provided job security and autonomy. Most baby boomers have spent their entire career in the same school or district, working within 150 miles of where they grew up.

I LOVE THIS JOB, BUT ...

Teachers born in or after 1982, referred to as millennials, maintain different career ideals than earlier generations. Recent findings on new teacher attrition report that half of all departures stem from job dissatisfaction or the desire to pursue a

better career inside or outside of education. Although teaching remains an appealing line of work, this generation is predicted to make job changes that are upwards, sideways, and backwards (Hess & Jepsen, 2009). In a retention study by Harvard University's Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, one young participant mused, "I love this job, but I think after four or five years of it, I'd be bored" (Peske, Liu, Johnson, Kauffman, & Kardos, 2001, p. 309). Another called herself "a work in progress," noting she wasn't exactly sure what she'd be doing in a few years. Although a 30-year relationship with an employer may not be essential, millennials do value new opportunities and strive to enhance their skills to make them more marketable.

Another distinction between older and younger teachers is that millennials are graduating from teacher preparation programs well-versed in the benefits of teamwork and collaboration. They expect to work directly with their peers to make their schools better, not just next door to them. Having been schooled during the proliferation of reforms and accountability, many millennials join the ranks thinking the system needs to be fixed (Johnson, 2004; Lovely & Buffum, 2007). They see their classroom as an integral part of a global community where immediate contributions to the profession can be made.

OLD VALUES, NEW REALITY

Although millennial teachers face new professional realities, many of their stories parallel stories of past generations. Nonetheless, old values take on new forms in the current context of schooling. Just as baby boomers established their own workplace identity, millennials maintain unique perspectives that will shape the future of teaching. As an emerging work group, this generation is more inclined to retool old values to match current beliefs than to relive the good old days.

One new reality for young teachers is that long hours are not part and parcel to good teaching. Millennials' strong allegiance to family, friends, and community compels them to put personal loyalties ahead of professional commitments. While baby boomers may perceive this as unwillingness to work hard, this generation sees it as a quality-of-life issue. For baby boomers, there is value in physically showing their work commitment. For millennials, punching a time clock is archaic, especially when they can work remotely.

A second new reality is change. As first adopters, millennials have a penchant to try new things. Instant access and rapid responses are the norm. Conventional boundaries blur as they move seamlessly among real, virtual, and hybrid worlds. While older teachers tend to resist change, younger teachers are

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THE MILLENNIAL TEACHER

- Expects to work with peers.
- Puts personal loyalties ahead of professional.
- Embraces change.
- Open to individual rewards.
- Adapts to shrinking job prospects.
- Not afraid to question authority.



THE BOOMER TEACHER

- Values working independently.
- Puts professional ahead of personal.
- Resists change.
- Seeks equality in pay and protections.
- Laments shrinking job prospects.
- More deferent to authority.



driven by it. Drawing on an analysis of interviews with Canadian teachers, Hargreaves (2005) found young teachers not only flexed and adapted to shrinking job prospects, they were more pragmatic and enthusiastic about doing so. The past benefits and superior work lives baby boomers lament losing is not a worry for new professionals, despite many having yet to secure teaching jobs.

A third new reality is the sense of importance, inclusion, and optimism this generation brings to the workplace. As baby boomer parents and teachers pushed self-esteem, millennials' confidence soared. Believing they can do and be all, they are unafraid to question authority. While older principals and peers may see this as arrogance or disrespect, young teachers see it as a way to be in the know. Principal feedback is coveted, too, since it is important to know if they're doing a good job.

A fourth new reality is fairness. While young teachers want to be treated fairly, they do not expect to be treated the same. Fair-

ness to a baby boomer is equal — equal pay, equal expectations, equal protections. Fairness to a millennial is about ability, not uniformity. In a recent Public Agenda survey, 80% of millennial respondents said the removal of ineffective colleagues would raise the bar on performance (Coggshall, Ott, Behrstock, & Lasagna, 2010). Although this generation is skeptical about using standardized tests to measure teacher effectiveness, they are open to alternative compensation and rewards that recognize individual achievement.

New realities are a compelling workplace issue for school leaders charged with finding and supporting committed teachers. Key to the success of new teachers is this: How can we intervene to build cohesion for the sake of student learning? The expectations of millennial teachers are not a substitute for the expectations of the baby boomer teachers who will soon retire. New teachers recognize they have to leave no child behind, despite socioeconomic status, language proficiency, or special needs. Yet Howe and Strauss (2008) contend it is not this pressure that demoralizes millennials, but instead situations where their best effort under pressure does not produce success. In the eyes of a millennial, average is failure. Without acknowledging this new reality, millennials may struggle to become the accomplished educators society is expecting.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Each generation maintains unique views about career success. Millennials are motivated by different opportunities, rewards, and working conditions than baby boomers. Perceptions about collaboration are an area where views do not always align. While a picture of effective collaboration might exist in teachers' minds, this picture can differ across age, career stage, and emotional state. Moreover, there are no easy-to-measure outcomes to evaluate high-quality collaboration.

To connect the dots, staff developers have to mesh old values with the new reality. Baby boomers have the most experience and institutional memory. Millennials bring fresh ideas and energy to the table. When working with young teachers, it is essential to incorporate their talent and initiative into the school's areas of emphasis. When working with seasoned teach-

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ers, it is essential to honor their experience and craft knowledge.

In a generationally friendly work culture, teachers are interdependent. To integrate the expertise of older team members with the innovative impulses of younger teachers, learning leaders should consider five strategies (Lovely & Buffum, 2007):

Don't paint every generation with the same brush.

Sweeping generalizations that all millennial teachers are one way and all baby boomers are another can lead to faulty assumptions. Acknowledge a team's diversity by keeping generational differences in mind. But don't believe every clash stems from those generational differences.

Let people argue with you. Encourage teachers to tell you what they think, even if they are much younger. Remember, millennials have been taught at an early age to share their opinions and speak their mind.

Show respect differently. Millennials don't want their ideas dismissed simply because they haven't been around very long. Baby boomers may expect more weight be given to their ideas because they've been around longer. To put respect in perspective, ask team members: What is it about respect (or lack thereof) that is keeping us from reaching agreement on this issue?

Give it to 'em their way. Continuous learning is vital to every generation. Teachers lose interest quickly if time is spent teaching them what they already know. No matter what stage of their career, teachers want to attend staff development related to their current assignment, not to their generation. At the same time, don't think every millennial is only interested in learning online or every baby boomer is afraid of a computer.

Offer a survivable experience. Two reasons young teachers leave the profession is a sense of isolation and difficult classroom assignments. Despite high departure rates among novices, it remains a common practice in schools to give young teachers multiple preps, combination classes, roving assignments, or behaviorally and academically challenged students. New teachers, whether older or younger, must have a survivable first-year experience.

FIND OPENINGS

Not all teachers will see eye-to-eye, even if they occupy the same generational niche. After all, personal differences among faculty have existed for decades. Yet teachers can no longer deal with their differences by closing their door. While millennials wish to be granted appropriate status as novices, they also want to be recognized for what they know. Opportunities in which staff members have the chance to reflect on and share perspectives about teaching will open the lines of communication. Without a collective mission where teamwork and collaboration are embedded in the work life of schools, generational identity may obscure progress. But given the right validation across age groups, diverse teacher perspectives can be used to enhance the professional learning culture.

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