

## Relevant, connected to the Millennial learners



***Interactive and participatory learning activities*** At SIM Global Education campus (from left), Mai from Vietnam, Shana from India, and Ethan Lim and Eddie Leow from Singapore, writing and editing articles on Economics

TERTIARY students today will not simply sit in class and listen to someone on stage talking down to them. They want to be connected to the speaker making the lesson presentation.

Learning is no longer a one-way street, but a bi-directional engagement between the teacher and the taught. And those in the education profession are sitting up to take note of this change in attitude among the students, described as Generation Y or Millennial Learners by Dr Christy Price, Professor of Psychology at Dalton State College in the US.

Dr Price was in Singapore in October 2013 as keynote speaker at SIM Global Education's Annual Education Conference, where she shared her research on Engaging Millennial Learners (usually defined as students aged 18 to 28 years old).

### **High expectations, little effort**

They are indeed a "new breed of students" who have an unrealistically high expectations of success combined with an astonishingly low level of effort on their part, she notes.

To find out more of their learning traits, Dr Price conducted a survey among her own students, asking them to respond to the following questions: (1) What did you do to prepare for the exam? (2) Considering what you did to prepare for the exam, what grade did you expect to earn? (3) What will you do differently in preparing for the next exam? (4) Is there anything I can do to assist you in preparing for the next exam?

She found that in response to the first question, students offered up surprisingly candid responses. For example, they replied, “I read parts of the chapter” and “I looked over my notes the night before and reviewed during my class that meets right before”.

Other responses were: “I looked over my notes in the car before coming to class”, and “I’m going to do much better next time, now that I bought the book”. For the last response, Dr Price notes that this student sat through three weeks of class and took the first exam without purchasing the required text!

“The most astonishing part of all of this was when these students were asked what grade they expected to earn, they confidently listed an A or a B,” she says. There clearly is a gap between students’ level of effort and their expectation of success.

## **Demanding educational consumers**

Dr Price quoted the book *Generation Me* (2006) in which author Jean Twenge described Generation Y as the first generation to be fully raised in the aftermath of the technological revolution in which information has been readily available to them with the click of a mouse. This environment has driven them to be demanding educational consumers with no tolerance for delay.

In addition, Twenge found that Generation Y youth are more likely to seek wealth as opposed to meaning and purpose in life; therefore, they typically view their college education as a means to an end. For these reasons, Generation Y Millennials often fail to see the value of a liberal arts education.

Finally, this generation finds social rules less important and they have become very informal in their writing, speaking, dress, and interactions with authority figures.

“Whether we like it or not, the Millennial learner is the new generation of student that we must influence, inspire, and serve,” Dr Price says. She lists six key principles of service excellence for education providers, with the goal of creating a transformative experience for learners.

## **Six R’s of Excellence**

1. **Resonate** with students, leading them on the hero’s journey, and helping them to overcome obstacles. Learning is a call to adventure. The student answers the call and begins the journey, taking on the role of hero. He or she encounters road blocks and becomes discouraged. A mentor comes along to guide and encourage and help the hero overcome the road blocks.

2. Create a **Relaxed**, non-authoritarian environment for students. Millennials thrive in a less formal, more comfortable learning environment in which they can informally interact with the professor and one another.

Dr Price says in her survey, student respondents perceived professors who listened, related, and talked to students about their lives, as connected to Millennial culture and perceived those professors who were unattached or solely focused on course content as not connected to Millennial culture.

3. Provide **Rationales** to students in the policies and rules of the institution. Unlike the older Baby Boomer generation who were raised in a more authoritarian manner in which they more readily accept the chain of command, Millennials were raised in a non-authoritarian manner and are more likely to conform, comply, and adhere to course policies when they are provided with a rationale.

Giving them a rationale goes a long way to motivate them to follow the rules. Avoid authoritarian language, such as “I require”, “you must”, “you should”. In general, Millennials seem to strongly resist authoritarian power structure.

4. Establish **Rapport** and be responsive to students’ needs. Millennials are used to having parents and other older adults in their lives show great interest in them. They appreciate it when professors show that same interest, and they seem to be more willing to pursue learning outcomes when educators connect with them on a personal level.

5. Offer the most **Relevant** services to best meet the needs of the students. “Our role as teachers have changed,” says Dr Price. “We’re no longer mere information providers; we have to create relevance and value in our teaching.”

6. Engage in **Reflective** practice regularly.

## **The ideal professor**

Dr Price’s survey reveals what students felt that an ideal professor should be:

1. Energetic, enthusiastic and upbeat, with a positive attitude.
2. Open-minded and flexible, particularly in assignments and course policy.
3. Alert as to whether students understand the lesson contents.
4. Nice, friendly, caring and helpful.
5. Approachable and easy to talk to. This is the No.1 characteristic of the Millennials’ ideal professor, says Dr Price.

“They seem to care more about who we are and how we interact with them, than they care about what we know,” says Dr Price.

## Ideal learning environment

Millennials also painted a picture of what an ideal learning environment would be like:

1. Students know one another and work together in groups. This finding is consistent with Millennials' team orientation, interdependence and desire for connection.
2. Learning is relaxed, enjoyable, and fun.
3. Multi-media is used, including podcasts, on-line activities, video, PowerPoint presentations, and so on.
4. Real-world examples that are relevant to the students' culture, are used.
5. Teaching is interactive and participatory, and a variety of teaching methods are employed, as opposed to a lecture only" format.

"If you lecture all throughout the time then we get bored. If you are constantly changing from lecture, to discussion, to group work, that helps a lot. It helps keep us awake and we learn more. Stuff gets into our head better," was one of the responses.



### Veteran teacher

Dr Christy Price, Professor of Psychology at Dalton State College, has been teaching at the college level for 17 years. Dr Price has studied teaching techniques that influence student motivation. Her recent research focuses on engaging Millennial learners.

**Picture:** Dr Price receives a token of appreciation from Adjunct Professor KC Lee, CEO of SIM Global Education, for her keynote speech at SIM in October 2013

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