

Teaching Generation M A Handbook for Librarians and Educators

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Preface

MILLENNIALS AT THE MILLENNIUM

At the outset of this book, we feel obliged to play devil's advocate and to challenge the assumptions and generalizations upon which this work rests: first, that a new generational cohort exists—Gen M; and, second, that its members are computer-savvy technophiles whose lives are encompassed by gadgetry. Only by teasing out the myths and realities regarding a new generation of students can we thoughtfully adapt various media or technology for educational purposes. The key here, and the purpose of this book, is to facilitate thoughtful planning for teaching Gen M—planning which brings about new and powerful learning opportunities for student and teacher alike.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* has recently (September 2008) added as part of its definition for the term “millennial” its use as a noun to describe the “millennial generation.” The *OED* credits the Strauss and Howe (1991) book, *Generations*, with the first use of the term (*OED*, accessed 2009). From the late 1990s onward, major business, political, and cultural writers in key media outlets such as *Business Week*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, and *Rolling Stone* have all acknowledged the existence of this group as a unique cohort and have attempted to define who these young people are and how they are different from prior generations. The names for this group have varied from Net Gen to Gen Next to Gen Y, but now seem to have coalesced around Generation Media or Generation Millennial or Gen M; hence, the title of this book—*Teaching Generation M: A Handbook for Librarians and Educators*.

Gen M now (at the end of the first decade of the new millennium) ranges in age from adolescents entering (or soon to enter) high school

(those born at the end of the era in the mid-to-late 1990s) to young adults entering the work force (those born at the start of the era in the early 1980s). Members of Gen M are characterized as adept multitaskers, adroit with technology, and abysmal at sustaining long attention spans. Howe and Strauss state unequivocally that Gen M as a group exhibits a unique set of traits quite distinct from previous generations:

As a group, Millennials are unlike any other youth generation in living memory. They are more numerous, more affluent, better educated and more ethnically diverse. More important, they are beginning to manifest a wide array of positive social habits that older Americans no longer associate with youth, including a new focus on teamwork, achievement, modesty and good conduct. Only a few years from now, this can-do youth revolution will overwhelm the cynics and pessimists. (Howe and Strauss, 2000: 4)

Howe and Strauss' words seem prescient in light of the 2004 and 2008 presidential election in the United States, where young voters (18–29) turned out in larger numbers than in any recent presidential election (Tankersley, 2008). Very recently, authors and political bloggers Michael Hais and Morley Winograd declared that Gen M represents “a new, large and dynamic generation and the realignment of American politics for the next 40 years . . . welcome to the Millennial Era” (Hais and Winograd, 2008).

Advertisers and marketers are paying close attention to the habits and personality traits of Gen M as well. One estimate puts the Gen M population at 64 million Americans with disposable income. *Women's Wear Daily* reports that from April 2007 through April 2008 Gen M women spent \$33.7 billion on clothes—outspending Gen X and Baby Boomers (Tran, 2008). Retailers, like political strategists, are sitting up and taking notice of Gen M as a power bloc. Likewise, cultural critics, sociologists, and marketers all seem in agreement that Gen M represents a true generational cohort. Is it fair or accurate, then, to paint them in broad generalities as wired, multitasking, screenoriented, media-saturated youths?

The Trouble with Generational Generalities

In discussing any age cohort, be it the Greatest Generation (born between 1901 and 1924), Baby Boomers (1946–1965), or Gen M (1980–1999), it is

customary to generalize that group's personality characteristics in broad strokes: members of the Greatest Generation are self-sacrificing, patriotic, and have a strong work ethic; Baby Boomers are idealistic, antiauthoritarian, and individualistic; Gen Ms are tech-savvy multitaskers with short attention spans (Lee, 2006). Critics of such sweeping generalizations are quick to point out that such descriptions seem closely akin to personality traits assigned to astrological signs.

This is not to say that members of an age cohort share no characteristics. Specific historical events, such as the attack on Pearl Harbor, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the acts of terrorism on September 11, serve as flashpoints of cultural change and have iconic and generation-defining meaning; but subgroups, as well as individuals within a generation, will have radically different interpretations and experiences of their cultural touchstones. George W. Bush and Al Gore, Cheech Marin and Rush Limbaugh, Sarah Palin and Janeane Garofalo—all are Baby Boomers. Based on this representative sampling, an interesting debate could be held regarding the shared generational values and vision of the Boomers. The point is to regard generational characteristics with healthy skepticism.

Net Natives and the Digital Divide

Although members of Gen M may indeed share a generational culture and characteristics, they are the most racially and ethnically diverse cohort in American history (“The Coming New Majority,” 2008) and indications suggest deep differences among Gen M individuals regarding kind and degree of computer usage. While it is important for academic librarians and teaching faculty to be mindful that the “M” in Gen M does not stand for “monolith,” it is also important to understand that many undergraduate students may not be members of Gen M at all. Giancola, Munz, and Trares in their recent study of adult college students found that approximately 73 percent of all postsecondary undergraduates are “nontraditional,” i.e., are not full-time 18- to 22-year-old college students. Indeed, a full 30 percent of undergraduates are working adults (Giancola, Munz, and Trares, 2008). Thus assumptions that all college students are “Net-natives” and “grew up digital” may not be true in particular real-life applications. Diversity in undergraduate demographics calls for diversity in pedagogical style, tools, and approaches.

Given the fact that various generations coexist across our school and campus communities and within individual classrooms and libraries,

it behooves us all to appreciate the unique perspectives of each other's generation and help each other learn and progress robustly through the twenty-first century. The editors and authors of *Teaching Generation M* fervently hope that the book offers some sociological grounding and understanding of Gen M and how to embrace new media and technologies to help meet our educational plans and goals.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Teaching Generation M: A Handbook for Educators and Librarians is structured around three questions: Who are the members of Gen M? What is their culture? What educational practices best address their needs? Part I of this book answers the question of "whom." The book begins with the Introduction by Robert J. Lackie, John W. LeMasney, and Kathleen M. Pierce exploring various perspectives on Gen M and their relationship with new media and technology. Chapter 1 by Colleen S. Harris looks at the all-too-real digital divide that still exists despite the seeming ubiquitousness of the home computer. Patricia H. Dawson and Diane K. Campbell (Chapter 2) and Susan Avery (Chapter 3) examine the new literacies that are requisite for understanding, analyzing, and utilizing the flood of information that hits Gen M daily. In Chapter 4, Art Taylor discusses a longitudinal study focusing on the search process performed by Gen M students in a formal, academic setting. Finally, much controversy surrounds how constant-connectivity and multitasking between various media affects the members of Gen M. Michele D'Angelo (Chapter 5) reviews the current scholarly literature and provides some strategies and suggestions for educators based on this research.

Part II looks at the Culture of Technology that is one of the main signifiers of Gen M. A large part of that culture elicits debate over issues of privacy, security, and safety on the Web. These issues also represent areas in which generational differences are most pronounced. Karen J. Klapperstuck and Amy J. Kearns discuss Gen M and their perceptions of the public and private space on the Web in Chapter 6. The Internet tools, popular sites, and popular pastimes embraced by many within the Gen M community are detailed in Chapters 7 through 11. Laurie M. Bridges (Chapter 7) addresses social networking sites, such as Facebook, and their potential educational use. Katie Elson Anderson (Chapter 8) examines the history, uses, and abuses of YouTube. Jeffrey Knapp (Chapter 9) discusses Gen M's dependence on Wikipedia and Google and how that

can serve as a springboard to more in-depth research. Nicholas Schiller and Carole Svensson (Chapter 10) discuss gamers and gaming culture. Tyler Rousseau (Chapter 11) looks at a new publishing medium for Gen M—Webcomics. This section closes with futurist Stephen Abram (Chapter 12) presenting an overview of the ecology of a new world that Gen M will inhabit in 2020–2025 and how libraries can be a part of it.

Part III specifically addresses educational theories, practical applications, and best practices. With regard to theory, Lauren Pressley (Chapter 14) discusses concerns regarding the implementation of new technology into the undergraduate curriculum. Chapters 13 and 15 through 19 present specific ideas for tools and technologies to engage Gen M and enhance their educational experience. These include: mobile technology (Boris Vilic and Robert J. Lackie, Chapter 13); cooperative learning strategies (Sharon L. Morrison and Susan L. Webb, Chapter 15); screencasting (Steve Garwood, Chapter 16); Google and Wikipedia (Mitch Fontenot, Chapter 17); the guided research paper (Joseph F. Joiner, Chapter 18); and the First-Year Experience (Beth Larkee, Chapter 19). The book concludes with a cautionary tale regarding teaching and technology and some thoughts for future planning and concerns (Laura B. Spencer and Vibiana Bowman Cvetkovic, Conclusion).

Strauss and Howe point out that at any given point America has extant four generations, a lineup that they refer to as “generational ‘constellation’” with each phase constituting approximately 22 years. As the generations age, they shift up one life cycle notch at a time and replace the generation that came before. They further note, “*Whenever the constellation shifts up by one notch, the behavior and attitudes of each phase of life change character entirely* [authors’ emphasis]” (Strauss and Howe, 1991: 31). If indeed we are all a part of a generational constellation, it is up to us as educators, librarians, trainers, and administrators, in particular, to provide the very best educational experience we can for our young adults. It is the intention of the editors and authors of this book to contribute in some small way to that effort by promoting understanding and providing some solutions.

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