Get the Millennial Learner to Focus on Learning Instead of Grades
- It May Be Easier Than You Think!

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Abstract:  Faculty often lament that students are more focused on grades than on learning, and students complain that faculty members are ineffective teachers. The reasons for this clash can often be found in the different attitudes and prior behaviors that each group brings to the learning environment. This interactive workshop will help faculty understand why many of today's learners have the attitudes that they do and will present strategies that can improve student motivation for learning. Case studies of students who successfully transformed their focus from grade-centered to learning-centered will be presented, and examples of successful pedagogical strategies will be discussed.

Introduction:  Millennial learners of the 21st century are, in many respects, quite different from their counterparts of a few decades ago. Learners today seem more focused on being credentialed and less concerned with obtaining a broad based, liberal arts education. Today’s faculty may find it challenging to provide engaging learning activities for this generation of students. However, faculty can instill in students a desire to think critically and demonstrate higher order thinking and problem solving skills, but students must be provided with efficient and effective learning strategies that will make them more successful in all of their learning tasks.

The Story of Five LSU Students

The Center for Academic Success (CAS) at LSU often sees students who are floundering in classes and who are seeking advice on how to become more efficient at studying and learning. It is often quite amazing to the study strategies consultants at the CAS that students are able to dramatically improve their performance after gaining information about themselves as learners, being introduced to strategies that will improve learning. The improvements in test scores of five LSU students are shown below. (Underlined scores are after students utilized the learning strategies they were taught at the Center for Academic Success.)

- Travis, junior psychology student
  47, 52, 82, 86
- Robert, freshman chemistry student
  42, 100, 100, 100
- Amy, junior organic chemistry student
  54, 82, 76, 78c
- Michael, senior pre-medical organic student
  30, 28, 80, 91
- Terrence, junior Bio Engineering student
  GPA 1.67 cum, 3.54 (F 03), 3.8 (S 04)

The learning strategies used by each of the students above resulted in an immediate improvement in their confidence that they could perform well with a change in their attitudes about the learning process and a resulting change in their enthusiasm for studying and learning. But why were the students performing so poorly before? The answers can be found when we consider the characteristics of many of today's millennial learners.
Millennial Learners and Faculty vs. 1970's Learners and Faculty

The term “millennial” learner can take on a wide variety of meanings. For the purposes of this presentation, however, a millennial learner is defined as any student who is attending college in the year 2001 or beyond. We will focus on three characteristics, which are contrasted with corresponding characteristics of learners in the 1970’s. These comparisons are offered as generalizations; neither group is monolithic. However, the majority of learners in each group are associated with the dominant characteristics assigned to the group. The three contrasting characteristics are their attitudes about acquiring a degree, their access to and utilization of computers and technology, and their tolerance for non-engaging pedagogical techniques. (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1970’s learners</th>
<th>Millennial Learners</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Producer Mentality</td>
<td>Consumer Mentality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very limited computer access</td>
<td>Ubiquitous computer access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerant of Non-Engaging Pedagogical Techniques</td>
<td>Intolerant of Non-Engaging Pedagogical Techniques</td>
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The characteristics listed above are based on the author's thirty-five years of experience teaching college students and assisting them in developing learning strategies. The term “producer mentality” refers to the general expectation that the student must produce a quality product before a satisfactory grade can be assigned for work performed. The term “consumer mentality” refers to the expectation that if tuition and fees are paid, a degree will be granted. Additionally, the students (consumers) must be kept satisfied during the process.

The ubiquitous presence of computers, cell phones, and other technology on today’s campuses is unparalleled. Thirty years ago, it was unlikely that any students other than computer science majors would have free access to computers on a regular basis. Today, however, if the residence halls on campus are not equipped for wireless Internet access, many students and parents are likely to look elsewhere for college enrollment. Furthermore, it is the author's experience that students today are more likely to require active learning strategies to keep them focused on educational pursuits than were the students in the 1970’s.

For purposes of comparison, a contrast is also made between three characteristics of the typical millennial faculty member and the typical faculty member of the 1970’s. (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Gilmartin, 1999).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1970’s faculty</th>
<th>Millennial Faculty</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>App. 25 years older than students</td>
<td>App. 30 years older than students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses primarily lecture format</td>
<td>Uses primarily lecture format</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows little about learning and strategies</td>
<td>Knows little about learning mechanisms and strategies</td>
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It is apparent that the millennial learners typically are quite different from their 70’s counterpart, but the millennial faculty members are very similar, at least with respect to the three characteristics listed.

The characteristics of the millennial learner provide special challenges for educators, but also special opportunities. There is currently a very large gap between faculty expectations of student behavior, and actual student behavior. Students entering their first-year of college at Miami University reported that they had studied about an hour a day outside of class during high school (Schilling & Schilling, 1999). These same students, however, expected to spend 30-40 hours a week in academic pursuits in college, including class attendance. College faculty members expected students to spend two to three hours outside of class for every hour spent in class. This represents a significant gap between professors’
expectations of the requirements for student success and the students’ expectations for their own success. Even more dramatic was that the time students actually spent studying was significantly less than their own expectations. Many students actually spent twenty or fewer hours per week on academic work, including class attendance.

In addition to the expectation gap, there is a communication gap when it comes to the communication of learning tasks. If a faculty member assigns a paper with the expectation that much of the content will involve analysis, but the student thinks that descriptive information is all that is needed, both will be disappointed with the results. The professor is disappointed with the quality of the papers received, and the student is disappointed in the grade assigned. The student goes to the campus learning center to complain that the grade was unfair, and the professor goes to the faculty development center complaining that the students are not performing well. In a sense, both assertions are correct because the expectations for student performance were not clearly communicated to the student. Today’s students must be explicitly taught the difference between activities such as description, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in the hierarchy of learning tasks. Without explicit instruction and clearly defined expectations, they will not be able to perform at the desired level.

Why Many Students Don't Know How to Learn or Study

Learning requires more than good instruction, a positive attitude, and expenditure of effort. It requires that students use appropriate learning strategies to master the material. Because most students enter college without having learned how to learn or how to study, they have difficulty succeeding in courses that require critical thinking. The reasons for their lack of knowledge about how to learn can usually be traced to their high school experiences. Interviews with students about their experience in their high school courses often reveal that the emphasis was on memorization of information, and the examinations involved their simply regurgitating the information that had been memorized. Furthermore, the day before the test most of their teachers would conduct a review of the test material, and this review consisted of going over the types of questions and problems that would appear on the test. If the students paid close attention to the review, doing no additional studying, they found it fairly easy to make an A or B on the test. When these same students take university courses they are convinced that they can begin studying one or two nights before the test (the equivalent of the high school review the day before the test), and do well on the exam. They receive a rude awakening when this is not the case.

There are other factors that negatively impact students’ ability to learn, one of the most important being their inexperience with spending time studying outside of class. A study by the Higher Education Research Institute found that 66% of 2003 entering first year students spent less than six hours per week doing homework in their senior year of high school. However, 46% of these students reported that they graduated from high school with an “A” average! Additionally, students' confidence is at an all-time high. 70% believe that their academic ability is above average or in the highest 10% among people in their age group. (http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/03_press_release.pdf)

Teaching Students HOW to Learn

As a result of their high school experience, most students come to college not knowing that learning is a process that involves different levels of information processing and considerable repetition.

One particularly effective way to present the different types of learning is through a discussion of Bloom's hierarchy of learning levels, shown below. (Bloom, 1956).
Although faculty generally assume that students know that memorizing information is not the same as learning for application, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation, this assumption is unwarranted. Formally introducing them to differences in the levels of learning is crucial to developing the understanding of this distinction in today’s students.

What Specific Learning Strategies Can Students Be Taught?

The Center for Academic Success at Louisiana State University has had great success teaching students to use The Study Cycle with Intense Study Sessions. The four-step process is described below.

THE STUDY CYCLE

Step 1: Preview or pre-read the information that will be covered in class before class. Spending 10 – 15 minutes reviewing chapter material (concentrating on the bold-face print, italicized writing, figures, graphs, diagrams, etc.) prepares the mind to receive and comprehend the material that will be discussed in lecture. The previewing provides background knowledge for what will be covered in the lecture. Cognitive scientists have empirically demonstrated the importance of background knowledge to understanding and acquiring new information (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, 2000).

Step 2: Go to class, and actively participate in lecture.
This step needs to be explicitly stated because the absenteeism in large introductory science classes is often extremely high (approaching 50% after mid-semester).

Step 3: Review and process class notes as soon after class as possible.
Spending 10 – 15 minutes reviewing and reworking lecture notes shortly after the lecture provides the mechanism for the information to be transferred from short-term to long-term memory, significantly improving retention.

Step 4: Use Intense Study Sessions
Intense Study Sessions are concentrated study sessions of approximately 60 minutes duration. During this short, but focused, study time, a considerable amount of learning can be accomplished.
Study Session consists of four segments, each of which is important for the session to have the maximum effect on learning.

a. 2 – 5 minutes: Set goals for the next 40 minutes  
b. 35 – 38 minutes: Work to accomplish the goals that were set.  
c. 10 minutes  Review what was studied  
d. 10 minutes  Take a break

Most students find that The Intense Study Sessions are real “procrastination busters” – providing a means for targeted study sessions that are efficient and “doable”. Short, focused sessions are more effective than three to four hour study marathons during which there is little meaningful learning accomplished.

**Effective Time Management Strategies**
The most significant deterrent to effective use of the learning strategies listed above is students' inability to manage their time effectively. Therefore it is important to teach specific time management strategies. The time management strategies that LSU students have found to be most useful are listed below.

- Keeping a semester calendar with dates of all tests, quizzes, due dates for papers, etc.
- Keeping a weekly calendar with specific times set aside for the intense study sessions discussed above
- Compiling "to do" lists of daily and/or tasks to be completed
- Using daylight hours to study instead of studying late at night

**What Additional Resources are Available to Students?**
The campus learning support center, found on many campuses, is a very important, but underutilized resource to help students develop metacognitive skills. Instructors can partner with the learning center to have learning strategies information presented in classes and to assist individual students. Often students will utilize the learning center if their instructor recommends it, but most are not likely to visit it on their own.

**Final Note:** Please visit the Center for Academic Success Website at [http://www.cas.lsu.edu/](http://www.cas.lsu.edu/). We have on-line workshops that will introduce instructors and students to effective learning and study strategies. Millennial learners can change their attitudes and behaviors about learning. But this will happen only if we teach them strategies and hold them accountable for meaningful learning.

**References and Resources**


Website for the Center for Academic Success at Louisiana State University. [http://www.cas.lsu.edu/](http://www.cas.lsu.edu/)