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Engaging the Millennial Generation in Class Discussions

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Students in the Millennial Generation (late 20s and younger) have been raised in an environment in which individuality is highly valued and information, entertainment, and social interactions are unlimited and at their fingertips. As a result, these students may have different educational expectations and needs than previous generations. Class discussions, if conducted correctly, can be a learning activity that complements the learning styles of this variety seeking, collaborative generation. To understand how to effectively engage Millennial students in active class discussions, we conducted six focus groups with students between the ages of 18 and 21 to explore whether and why they value class discussions and to identify the barriers and the facilitators of active participation in class discussions. The present article summarizes the focus group findings, integrates them with what we know about students in the Millennial Generation, and uses this information to develop suggestions for actively engaging today’s students in classroom discussions.

Keywords: discussion, Millennial Generation

Faculty generally value and encourage classroom discussions because they increase student accountability, engage students in active learning, and stimulate thinking (Gray and Madson 2007; Jones 2008; McKeachie 1990). Research on the Millennial Generation (students born between the 80s and mid-2000s) suggests that they have different expectations and classroom needs than previous generations of college students (Howe and Strauss 2003). Thus, different approaches to classroom discussions may be necessary to engage them in active dialogue. Compared to recent generations, Millennials are easily bored, expect variety, are self-directed, have high levels of self-esteem, are collaborative, are ethnically diverse, and crave interactivity (Oblinger 2003; Raines 2002; Rainie 2001; Prensky 2001; Twenge 2006). Because of their interest in working in groups and their low tolerance for boredom, the traditional lecture may not be as effective with the Millennial Generation as it was with previous generations. Class discussions, if conducted correctly, can be a learning activity that complements the goals and expectations of this variety-seeking, collaborative, inquisitive generation. Despite this, researchers have found that most traditional-aged students remain silent during discussions, relying on a handful of their peers to carry the classroom discourse (Howard, James, and Taylor 2002). We use information gleaned from focus groups to identify whether and why students of the Millennial Generation find class discussions useful and how faculty can facilitate greater participation in those discussions.

To explore these questions, we conducted six focus groups. Twenty randomly selected sophomores and 23 randomly selected juniors participated in an hour-long focus group. All students were from a small private undergraduate college in Michigan. The size of the groups ranged from six to eight students; participants were paid $20 for their participation and were given a meal. Seventy percent of the students were female, and the age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 21, with a mean of 19.6. All students were from the Millennial Generation. Eighty-five percent of the participants were White. Fifty-three percent of students randomly selected to be in the focus groups participated in the study.

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A team of five researchers developed codes that were used to classify focus group statements. Each statement was coded separately by three researchers, who then met and discussed the codes until 100% agreement was reached. Below we summarize what we learned from the focus groups about classroom discussions.

Benefits Associated with Class Discussions

In order to understand whether and why students find discussions useful, we asked the students, “Do you feel that class discussions are a useful learning tool?” and “In what ways are they useful?” All students reported that classroom discussions are useful, but not always for the same reasons that faculty value class discussions. The three main reasons why students found classroom discussions useful are (each accounting for approximately one-third of the focus group comments) that they (1) make learning more active; (2) result in a deeper understanding of the material; and (3) promote perspective taking.

Active Learning

Millennial students have been raised in an entertainment-focused, multimedia environment in which they rapidly shift their attention from one source of information or stimulation to another. As a result, these students tend to have a low tolerance for boredom and require high levels of stimulation to remain focused. It is not surprising, then, that our focus group students value the active learning that occurs during discussions as opposed to the more passive learning associated with lectures. Students consistently report that discussions help them “focus better,” “make it easier to pay attention,” and stop them from “zoning out.” The attention-facilitating feature of discussions is frequently overlooked when researchers and theorists discuss the value of active learning, but students find this to be a major benefit of class participation.

Enhanced Understanding

A second benefit of discussions, according to students, is that they facilitate a deeper understanding of the material, which may explain why, compared to a lecture, discussions are related to longer-term retention (McKeachie 1999). A sophomore majoring in communication and philosophy explains how discussions have led him to a deeper understanding of the material: “If an idea is built on faulty logic, you get called out on it, which greatly helps you later when you’re trying to think of an answer to a big question or problem.” This quote illustrates Jones’s (2007) proposition that class participation stimulates thinking by encouraging students to grapple with ideas and form their own conclusions.

Understanding the Perspective of Others

In the words of a junior psychology major, “I wasn’t thinking of.” In the words of a junior psychology major, “I think it is important and useful when you hear lots of different opinions and lots of different voices in the class.”

The digital world brings a wealth of information to students, but it does not provide the opportunity to evaluate, integrate, or even reflect on that information. Discussions offer a format for students to think critically about and integrate this information. They can serve as an important link, helping students make sense of the shifting, often contradictory world of information and opinions. Faculty are in a unique position to help students develop these critical thinking skills through the use of discussions.

Students in the Millennial Generation want to think for themselves rather than accepting, without reflection, what authority figures tell them (Twenge 2006). This message came through clearly in our focus groups. Students value discussions because they provide an avenue for students to come to their own conclusions. As one student stated, “Discussions really helped bring out the topics in the class and made you feel comfortable with them. Gave you your own point of view, and you weren’t told what to think or feel.” Millennial students tend to bristle when professors try to impose their viewpoint without allowing for discussion. A sophomore biology major stated:

My professor didn’t really ask questions or have discussions. It was more so that he could tell you what he thought and when anyone would say what they thought, he would shoot them down right away … He was the professor who APARENTLY KNEW EVERYTHING. We were not allowed to share our opinions. So, obviously we DON’T KNOW ANYTHING. Everyone was really frustrated.

If faculty want students to listen to and consider their opinions, they must engage in dialogue, not lecture.
Creating a Comfortable Climate for Classroom Discussions

Students, like faculty, feel uncomfortable when there is only minimal participation in class discussion. A sophomore dance major sums up these feelings well: “I have a class now where it’s painful. The discussion is so slow, and you just want to get it over with because no one will answer.” Why, if students value class discussions and find it “painful” when there is a low level of participation, do faculty often have difficulty engaging students in discussions? To learn more about the barriers and the facilitators of healthy discussion, we asked focus group students to identify the situations in which they feel most comfortable and least comfortable (1) participating in discussions, (2) arguing their point of view, and (3) challenging the viewpoint of another. Because we received similar responses to these three questions, they are addressed together in the sections below.

Each class develops its own norms for participation, which are shaped by both the professor and the students (Fassinger 1996). Once established, norms are particularly hard to break. Thus, it behooves faculty to create the conditions conducive to active discussions in the first few class sessions, while norms for participation are developing. Otherwise, the opportunity may be lost. We learned from our focus groups that norms for participation are primarily shaped by (1) professor’s attitudes, (2) professor’s ability to moderate the discussion, (3) classroom atmosphere, and (4) student behaviors and attitudes. The most important factor, the one that received the most comments from students, is the professor’s attitudes.

Professor’s Attitudes

Professor’s attitudes can influence discussion. The two most frequently cited attitudes are summarized below.

Openness

Professor openness accounted for the majority of responses when we asked students how faculty can facilitate discussion, yielding twice as many responses as the next most common category, classroom atmosphere. The Millennial students tend to be more conventional than previous generations (Howe and Strauss 2003). Although they want to speak for themselves, they respect authority figures, and earning the approval of their professors is important to them (Howe and Strauss 2003; Oblinger 2003). To feel comfortable and safe enough in the classroom to share one’s thoughts and opinions, students must perceive that their professors are open to student opinions, and that their grades and their professors’ opinions of them will not be negatively affected by what they say in a discussion. According to a junior biology major: “There are some professors I felt a lot more comfortable being involved in the discussion because I know that they are not going to care if I disagree with them. With other ones I feel like you can’t disagree with them.” A junior education major explains the situations in which he feels comfortable contributing to discussions: “Some of my pros have actually come out and said ‘you know that we all come with different opinions, and I want to hear what you have to say.’” Conversely, when students perceive that a professor is not open to opinions that diverge from their own, they are very reluctant to participate. A sophomore math major stated:

Not many of us agreed with her [the professor]. But, if you did try and say something, it usually just added to her fire and it just didn’t turn out to be a good class period that day. So, either you had to really watch what you said or really be able to back yourself up. But, even in that case, you would still usually get shot down. I don’t know if it was intentional, but that class ended up being a very quiet class most of the time.

Most students are loathe to voice their opinion if they feel their professor will disagree with them. This is especially true of traditional-aged students who are much less likely to participate in discussions than those who are 25 and older (Howard, James, and Taylor 2002; Howard, and Henney 1998). Compared to previous generations, the Millennial Generation was raised in a child-centered society, where high self-esteem was considered critical, and children were taught that each person is “special” (Howe and Strauss 2003). As a result, Millennial students are generally unused to criticism and are sensitive to being corrected or disagreed with in public (Sacks 1997; Twenge 2006). Faculty may fail to realize how vulnerable these young adults feel and how frightening it is for them to disagree with their professors. When their professor openly disagreed with them, students in our focus groups tended to interpret it as a personal attack, using words like “scared” and “intimidated” when recounting these experiences. A sophomore majoring in education sums up these feelings:

[The professor] was very pointed with comments and very direct and very blunt. So, if you said something that she didn’t like, it would just be, “Well no. That’s not right.” And it felt like a personal attack . . . I talked to the other kids in the class and we just felt like the professor hated all of us because she got so aggressive about things. So, we would rarely, if ever, talk in that class, unless we were called on.

A junior chemistry major reports:

I think the most uncomfortable situation arises when a professor’s point of view is already firmly made, and they respond kind of incredulous, “Oh, really? Oh you think that?” It becomes clear that you are up against the professor, which is pretty intimidating . . . because you are scared of their wrath.

If the professor emphasizes his/her role as an expert, students are less likely to speak up in class (Ezzeddine 2008;
Weaver and Qi 2005). A junior exercise science major states, “I wouldn’t want to argue because I know that this prof has been studying it for most of his life. Where I have probably only been studying it for that semester. So, they’d probably be able to kick my butt in any debate that we would have.”

The students engaged in lively debates about whether they thought faculty members should voice their opinions on topics being discussed. Most students felt more comfortable expressing their point of view if they did not know their professor’s stand on the issue. A junior education major states:

We had discussions about the difference between being liberal and being conservative . . . He never made his values known . . . It was always very comfortable to say what you were feeling and what you were thinking because the professor never made it “This is where I stand and this is what I believe.” It was like, “I just want you to learn and make this class useful for yourself.”

However, there was general agreement among focus group students that, if the faculty member demonstrated respect for divergent opinions and actively sought alternative points of view, a healthy discussion could occur, even if the students knew the faculty member’s position on the topic.

In some situations it is appropriate, even critical, for a professor to voice his/her point of view. For example, if a student makes a racist comment in class, remaining silent implicitly condones the comment and represents a missed opportunity to educate students about racist attitudes. In situations like this, where a student comment violates a prof-essor’s deeply held belief or where the teacher’s silence is potentially harmful to a student’s education, we recommend first giving other students an opportunity to speak out against the offending/troubling comment. The faculty can then validate and reinforce those moderating responses. In the rare cases in which a student does not speak out against an offending comment, it is appropriate, and necessary, that the professor voice and explain his/her position on the subject.

**Enthusiasm**

Enthusiasm has been recognized as a characteristic of effective teaching (Rosetti and Fox 2009; Bosshardt and Watts 2001). This quality is even more important when dealing with the Millennial Generation, who have a low tolerance for boredom. If not engaged by what is going on in the classroom, Millennial students will seek alternate stimulation or sources of information by surreptitiously texting or surfing the internet. When competing with cyberspace for the attention of undergraduate students, enthusiasm is important. A female communication major explains, “I’ve had a couple of classes where it was awesome. The discussions went really well because the teachers were really inspiring and actively involved.”

**Professor’s Ability to Moderate the Discussion**

According to Soter, Wilkinson, Murphy, Rudge, Reninger, and Edwards (2008), discussions are most productive when they are structured and focused, but not dominated, by the instructor. Consistent with this finding, our students report that discussions are more productive and inclusive when the professor moderates and/or facilitates so that students feel safe expressing their thoughts. Faculty can do several things to make those situations feel safe. First, they can set the appropriate tone for healthy, respectful disagreements. A sophomore majoring in management explains how one of his professors set such a tone by advocating for civility and openness:

The first day of class I walked in, and he talked about how we were going to have a lot of debates in this class, and he said, “I am going to challenge everything you say. It is not because I disagree with you, but because I want you to learn to support your own opinions and build an argument. Just think of me as a prof. who is just straight forward with you. I want you guys to speak up. I want you to challenge each other. You can challenge other people without being overly argumentative.”

Second, students feel safer engaging in difficult discussions when their professor serves as a moderator and keeps the discourse from spiraling into a heated exchange. As one student explained:

If, after somebody says something, the professor repeats it or maybe asks them “Is that your main point?” to facilitate the discussion instead of it being just a constant debate—to moderate it so that it doesn’t become really emotionally charged and remains more informational—like more, “This is where I stand.” and not to hurt someone else’s feelings.

Establishing guidelines is the third thing that faculty can do to facilitate difficult discussions. One student explained that difficult discussions went more smoothly when the professor set discussion guidelines, such as no interrupting or name-calling.

Finally, students feel more comfortable stating their opinions if they receive positive feedback from their professor.

**Classroom Atmosphere**

Classroom atmosphere influences whether students are likely to contribute to a class discussion. Atmosphere is shaped in part by the professor’s attitudes, but it is also influenced by the behaviors and relationships of students in the class.

**Comfort with classmates**

Over half (60%) of the classroom atmosphere comments dealt with how well students in a class knew each other. Familiarity breeds comfort. A 19-year-old mathematics major
sums up this feeling, “You have to know the people in your class pretty well. You can talk to your friends easily, but once you get in a class with strangers its more, ‘Ahh, do I want to say that or do I not want to say that.’ If people knew each other better in class, that would help.”

To increase participation in discussions, students suggest that professors conduct exercises that give them an opportunity to know each other, such as introductory speeches or co-operative in-class exercises. A female communication major described a course in which discussions went exceptionally well:

I had a class last semester where the discussion went really well. It was a speech class. So, after the first speech everyone knew a bunch about everyone else. It wasn’t just, “Oh, that’s the guy in the green shirt.” It was like, “Oh, that’s John and he is from so-and-so.” It made discussion go much better. It’s probably the best class I’ve ever taken.

**Classroom Formality**

Millenials tend to prefer informal settings and endorse the norm of equality (Twenge 2006). Consistent with this preference, focus group students feel less comfortable contributing to discussions in more formal/impersonal classes where, for example, the professor refers to everyone by their last names or calls on people randomly. A sophomore English major explains, “If the professor is warm . . . they make you feel comfortable. If a professor is really hyper-formal, it can really silence a lot of kids.”

**Student Attitudes and Behaviors**

The attitudes and behaviors of students in the class are also important determinants of classroom atmosphere. In this area, the professor has the least amount of control.

**Classmates’ opinions**

Student behaviors can have a chilling effect on classroom discussion. Millennial students are team-oriented and sensitive to feeling judged or alienated by their classmates. If they perceive that their opinion is not in the mainstream, they often censor themselves. A junior communication major, who felt uncomfortable voicing his opinion, explains, “In one of my religion classes where I felt like everyone was really negative about a certain idea that I was not so negative on. And that was frustrating because it was really personal for me.”

If a student voices a minority opinion, faculty must be careful to ensure that the student feels some level of support. This is particularly tricky if the student’s opinion is disagreeable to the faculty member or is not substantiated by the literature. In these cases, support may be provided by thanking the student for voicing a controversial position and by noting that open and honest speech is critical to a healthy discussion.

**Confidence and preparation**

Millennial students are generally sensitive to appearing vulnerable or unintelligent in front of their peers. If students are not prepared or are uncomfortable with their understanding of the material, they will be reluctant to contribute to discussions. According to a junior exercise science major, “I was really scared about speaking up because I didn’t know if what I was talking about was going to be correct. I wouldn’t want to participate because I wouldn’t want to look stupid.”

The Millennial generation is the generation that has been encouraged to have high self-esteem. Prior to college, experiences in which they have been publicly criticized or told that they are wrong have probably been rare. Hence, they are relatively thin-skinned and reluctant to put themselves in a position in which they may look foolish, or even incorrect. To promote discussion, then, faculty should avoid questions that have a clear right or wrong answer. Not only are students reluctant to respond unless they are “100%” certain they have the correct answer, these types of questions create a situation in which the teacher is viewed as the authority, which also squelches discussion (Neal 2008). A sophomore social work major explains, “I had a class last year, and the professor was very leading with his questions. You know what he wanted you to answer. When students didn’t answer that way, he gave a look like, ‘That’s not what I was thinking.’ And it really diminished participation from the rest of the class.”

Students are also reluctant to add their thoughts to a discussion if they do not have a strong opinion about the issue. A junior language arts major explained, “When I don’t have a strong opinion on something, then I don’t feel like I can back myself up . . . . In the discussions that I absolutely know what my stand is and I am firm and don’t waver on it, that’s when I speak up more in class” (emphasis added).

To give students the space and time to form opinions, one suggestion is to have students write “one-minute” papers or engage in brief, small-group discussions before opening up the topic with the entire class (Gray and Madson 2007). Time to reflect and to introduce their thoughts to a small group will give students more of the confidence needed to voice their opinions to the entire class.

**Conclusions**

Several characteristics of the Millennial Generation make discussions particularly well suited to their educational needs and interests. Students in the Millennial Generation tend to believe that all opinions should be heard and treated with respect; they believe in equality and bristle at authoritarian and hierarchical structures; and they are accustomed to having easy access to multiple venues for interaction, entertainment, and information, resulting in a low tolerance for boredom. Because discussions provide
variety and allow students to voice and develop their opinions in an egalitarian setting, they represent an excellent learning tool for this generation. However, the Millennial Generation is also highly sensitive to criticism and reluctant to speak if they feel uninformed or are unsure of how their comments will be received. Faculty need to be aware of the unique opportunities and also the vulnerabilities associated with the Millennial Generation when planning classroom discussions.

We conclude with 10 tips, based on findings from our focus groups, for creating an atmosphere that is conducive to active classroom discussions. Before presenting those tips, it is important to recognize that our focus groups were conducted at a medium-sized Midwestern liberal arts college. The majority of students participating in the focus groups were White and female, which is consistent with the demographics of the college where the focus groups were conducted. Because our students’ responses are consistent with characteristics associated with the Millennial Generation, we believe that our recommendations are broadly relevant. Nonetheless, students in larger, more diverse, urban and/or male-dominated institutions are likely to have different norms for classroom participation and different conditions that facilitate or stifle discussions. Therefore, caution must be taken when generalizing our findings to other colleges or universities. Faculty need to consider the unique characteristics of their student body when trying to optimize conditions for classroom discussions.

Tips for Creating an Atmosphere Conducive to Active Classroom Discussions

DO

1. Work to develop a comfortable classroom atmosphere at the very beginning of the semester while norms for participation are being established.
2. Engage in exercises in which students get to know each other, increasing their level of comfort with their classmates.
3. Show respect for all opinions, even those that diverge from your own.
4. Set ground rules for civil discussions.
5. Moderate difficult discussions.
6. Show enthusiasm for the subject matter.

DO NOT

1. Let a student feel isolated or unsupported in a discussion.
2. Argue or openly disagree with a student during a discussion.
3. Ask questions or engage in discussions in which there is only one correct answer.
4. Create an authoritarian classroom atmosphere.

REFERENCES


