Y Gens in Higher Education – Who are they and what do they expect from us?

Abstract

The growing interest in Canada about the student and their student opinions about post-secondary education experiences has become the latest focus in public print media in 2006. As members of post-secondary institutions, what do we really know about students and their learning expectations? This question is explored through the lens of a professor and a student. The article provides a professor like overview of the “vision” of the Y Generation students and shares the “voice” of a Y Gen learner. The emergent story for university teachers appears to lie in the collaborative exploration of teaching and learning experiences.

Who are the students in higher education today? For an increasing number of educational experiences, both the teacher and student are somewhat invisible to each other through the increasing distance and online course offerings. Larger classes and face to face teaching experiences, while later providing a real time image of students, does not reveal the multi-faceted Y Generation or “Gen Y” or “Ygen” student. The determination of the cohort constituting the Y Generation like other demographic demarcations has variability. Wikipedia (2007) has identified persons born between 1978 and 2000 as defining this cohort. Characterized as impatient, skeptical, blunt and expressive, image driven, young, adaptable, technologically savvy, learning orientated efficient multi-taskers, and tolerant the Y Gens comprise the largest generation since the baby boomers (NAS, 2007).

Much of the current discussion and literature relative to Y Gens is typically found in relationship to the work place from both a career planning and employer perspectives. Foster’s (2006) interview of Linda Duxbury, Sprott School of Business, describes four distinct generations in the workplace: 1) Veteran Generation who were born before 1946; 2) Baby Boomers, born 1946-64 and make up 58% of labour market; 3) Generation X, born 1961-1974 and
described as over educated, under utilized, and under achieving; and 4) Generation Y, Millennial, Nexus Generation, born 1975 and beyond. In the article, Duxbury states that the later generation in Canada has “seen their parents downsized… go on stress leave… take Prozac and get divorced… and claim they will never put a job ahead of their life… Throughout their lives this generation had been challenged by parents and teachers to have opinions and ideas and logically to argue their case… as a result they don’t take things at face value, they want to argue and understand them. They also have the reality that the future will likely hold more jobs than qualified people to fill them” (Foster, 2006, 16).

In sum, this generation gap is described as, Boomers who see the younger generation as lazy, Gen X who thinks the youngest generation are spoiled and want boomers to quit because impeding their career, and Gen Y feel that no one respects or listens to them, They want an opportunity to learn and a mentor not a boss to tell them what to do. (Foster, 2006, 17). With increasing numbers of students in this Generation participating in higher education, a core debate in our knowledge economy often centers on learning for learning’s sake or job preparation. The resultant employer appetite for the theoretical and practical to become more apparent in curriculum is keeping stride along with student expectations for the teaching and learning relationship.

To gain further insight into this inter-generational picture of Y Gen learners, this paper explores the vision captured traditionally in student’s social and demographic data and the voice of a student to offer insight into the presenting question – Who are our learners?

The Vision

The vision of students who comprise these learners is influenced by the selection of the viewing lens. A historical lens highlights the variance in generational landscapes, a demographic lens creates a wide angled image of students, a financial lens automatically focuses on the access element of the student and higher education relationship, and the “zoom” lens illuminates student diversity.
Historical Lens

In 1998, Ron Nief created the Mindset List as a humorous way for educators to connect with first year students with generation relevant examples. Almost a decade later this list has become an internationally “utilized guide to the intelligent but unprepared adolescent consciousness” (Nief & McBride, 2006). This list links the mindset of the professorate to that of the entering class. For example, a professorate world view experience in 2006 might be as described in the following statements:

- As children we would ride in cars with no seat belts or air bags.
- We would leave home in the morning and play all day, as long as we were back before dark. No one was able to reach us.
- When we rode our bikes, we had no helmets.
- We drank sugar soda.
- Students failed a grade in school.
- Idea of parents bailing us out if we broke a law or did not obey others was unheard of.

The Mindset list (2006) recognizes,

Most 18-year-old students entering the class of 2010 this fall were born in 1988. They grew up with a mouse in one hand and a computer screen as part of their worldview. They learned to surf the internet as they learned to read. While they were still in their cribs, the 20th century started to close as the Berlin Wall came down, the Soviet bloc disintegrated, and frequent traditional wars in Latin America gave way to the uncontrolled terrors of the Middle East. … entering students form “a generation that has always been ‘connected’ and is used to things happening in ‘real time,’ like live satellite coverage of revolutions and wars, instant messaging, and movies on demand. They expect solutions for every problem, from baldness to diseased organs. To the chagrin of teachers and parents, they’ve developed their own generational means of communication

They are wireless, yet always connected.
"Google" has always been a verb.
They grew up in mini-vans.
They have always been able to watch wars and revolutions live on television.
They have always preferred going out in groups as opposed to dating.

(Nief & McBride, 2006)

**Demographic Lens**

With increased emphasis on recruitment and retention in Canadian higher education, data about students is more relevant, user friendly, and accessible today than in the past. Generally, we know that there are 1.7 million full-time and part-time students in Canada with 970,000 in university and 736,000 in college. University enrolment has been on the incline. For example between 1999-2000 and 2003-04, student participation in higher education increased by 20%. Variance in these rates is evident across the country – with B.C. reporting the lowest rate at 13.5% and Nova Scotia the highest at 39.0% (Statistics Canada, 2003).

**Financial Lens**

The financial lens provides insight into understanding the learners in context to their relationship to a significant variable in education – its cost. Such a lens would show, for example in 2004-05, that undergraduate university tuition for Canadian Students reported a 3.9% increase overall for an average rate of $4172. This takes into account four provinces (MA, NL, QC, ON) who had capped fees increases. Interestingly, the highest fees ($5984) were reported in Nova Scotia – the place of the highest participation rates – and the province of Quebec residents in Quebec paid the lowest fees at $1683. Further, analysis would reveal the range of funding sources which students access to fund post-secondary students studying full-time would be described as: 7% – employment prior to school; 64% – employment during the academic year; 58% – non-repayable from family; 36% – grants, bursaries, scholarships; 26% – government student loans; 17% – investment income (RESP); 16% – repayable from family; and 14% – private loans or lines of credit (Statistics Canada, 2003).
Diversity Lens

Perhaps the greatest shift in diversity in higher education has been the increased participation of women in postsecondary studies. For example, over half of the student population is now comprised of female students. Likewise, the perceived homogeneity of students of the past is becoming refocused on the celebration of each unique student as evidenced in the creation and revision of academic policies and services. The identifiable diversity in higher education has become more apparent in the last five years (Farr, 2005).

Such diversity has been driven by an equity/human rights agenda by student advocates such as persons with disabilities. Other emergent agendas drive a social justice agenda recruiting and supporting marginalized groups such as Aboriginal students and economic and cultural agendas as evidenced with international student recruitment. For example, Aboriginal person’s participation in PSE is currently one-half of that of the Canadian population. Increasing research such as the Best Practices in Increasing Aboriginal Postsecondary Enrolment Rates has provided useful information on how to best prepared for the increased participation of this cohort over the next ten years (Malatest, 2002).

The trend towards increased international recruitment efforts by Canadian educational institutions is often linked to the financial incentive which drives such recruitment. In 2004, for instance, the average tuition fees increased 4.5% ($11,307) for graduate students and 5.6% ($11,903) for undergraduates. This reflects an average 3 times the price of Canadian students. Government policy has also been changing to accommodate this trend. In April 2005, the Federal Government made changes to off-campus work and post-graduate stay/employment regulations. The 2002 College and University Study revealed that 5% of university and 8% of college students are self-reporting disabilities and seeking services and/or accommodations. Such a “zoom” focus provided in these examples adds an important layer of understanding about students. Traditionally, as educators we rely on such lenses accompanied by learning style assessments and the “getting to know you” introductory class exercise to frame our vision of the learner.
From Voice

To what extent do we, as educators, have a true picture of the learner of today? Students have much to offer to inform the teaching and learning process (Tucker, 2006). Below is an excerpt from the voice of a student which describes the Y Gen Learner in relationship to authority, grades, future, peers, and technology (Hardy Cox & Courage, 2006):

My name is Charlotte Courage and I am a forth year Bachelor of Social Work student here at Memorial University. I was born 21 years ago today so I fall right into the middle of the Y gen. When I first met with Dr. Donna to discuss this project, I will admit that didn’t know what to say. It is hard to make assumptions for an entire group of people that is so diverse and unique. One of the defining features of my generation is a large unwillingness to unquestioningly conform and a constant battle to be individuals. It was very challenging to remove myself in order to objectively describe my generation from the inside out. I once heard that it is impossible for rabbit to describe what he looks like when he jumps through a field. Being a part of my generation is all I know and this is the first time that anyone has ever expressed any interest in delving into my reality to explore what makes my generation unique.

Before I begin I think it is important that you know a little bit about me. As I said I am a fourth year student currently completing a field placement at Choices for Youth here is St. John’s. I am class president which gives me the opportunity to sit on school committees and act as a liaison between students and faculty. I am currently employed part time at a museum where I have worked for the past three years. I am also a Brownie leader with the Girl Guides and I have been in Guiding since I was five years old so Guiding has a special place in my heart. I am also big sister with Big Brothers Big Sisters and I am very involved in my church. I also try to maintain some semblance of a social life…“try” being the operative word.
So, what does it mean to be a Y-Gen??

1. We are cynical of authority.
I have grown up skeptical of authority. This should come as no surprise. As a Newfoundlander I have witnessed the demise of our fishery and watched politicians scramble to pick up the pieces. Our people are leaving this province at astonishing rates for the riches of Alberta or Ontario. I cannot count how many of my friends parents have been laid off from jobs after working there for the entirety of their adult life.

   I see people in authority as people who, for whatever mix of luck and ambition, landed in the position. Therefore I refuse to cave and cower and give them unwavering respect just because of their position. I have witnessed figures of authority come and go. We have recently seen federal and provincial politicians involved in financial misappropriations. Federal politicians feel entitled to call fellow politicians ‘dogs’. Municipal council meetings resemble a poorly written Saturday Night Live sketch or an episode of Codco. How can I then look up to these people and respect their authority?

   This attitude then transfers over into the classroom. As academic gowns went out of fashion, so did the unquestioning obedience of students towards their professors. I respect professors because they respect me. A PhD isn’t going to be enough to get respect. Respect is to be earned and I can’t promise that it will be easy.

2. We are grade driven.
I love to learn. At the risk of being called a nerd, I would say that I have a passion for learning and I adore university for that very reason. However, I would be lying if I said that grades were not important to me. The reality is that there is very little that I will do academically, if there is no numerical grade attached. There are demands being placed on me on a daily basis and they are often overwhelming. Therefore, alternate assignments, optional lectures and other non-mandatory activities must take a backseat to work that must be done. I would like nothing more then to be able to take part in optional activities but I cannot do so at the expense of my graded work.
There is a huge misconception that we are only interested in activities that have some kind of pay out. I have grown up in a consumer driven society and many people falsely assume that we do not do optional work because there is no payout. After all, I am a part of the MTV, instant gratification, Microsoft generation. If anything it is the opposite. I desperately wish that I could take part in these extra curricular activities but I am too consumed with the constant demands of those who not only can reward me with high grades, they can also punish me with low grades. If you truly want me to participate in an activity, add a small numerical incentive and I will be there.

3. We are future focused.
For me, it is not a question of “if” I will attend graduate school. I started researching master’s programs before I was accepted into the BSW program here at Memorial. I am faced with questions such as do I want to stay here at Memorial, or will I enter a university that does not require working experience before entering their program, or will I wait two years and attend another school? For me, getting my master’s is a given, not a choice. Realistically, the positions that I am interested in require an MSW or several years of experience. I cannot manufacture years of social work experience, but I can attend graduate school and speed up the process. I also want to attend graduate school because I am not content with a degree that will only give me generalist knowledge. I need to excel and I want to gain specific knowledge in areas of interest to me.

This focus on the future means that I am constantly thinking about these factors. I am not in my program just to obtain a passing grade. While minimal passing grades will still give me a Bachelor’s degree, it will not get me into the graduate program of my choice. I need to have top marks because they will be important in a few years time. I do not want to look back and realize that I missed my opportunity because I allowed myself to settle for average, when I am capable of more.

I believe that this vision for the future is extremely important to realize for professors and faculty. I truly believe that there should be more supports for those who plan on pursing future education. What I have learned has been through my own research but I feel that there
needs to be allowances made for those who are not just looking for a passing grade. We are looking to be competitive and for many of us, we don’t even know what competitive means because we only have short life experiences to draw upon.

4. We see ourselves as a group.
Before we were all accepted as a class into the Bachelor of Social Work program, very few of us knew one another. Now I can honestly say that we are a very tight and cohesive group. While I realize that this is not typical of every faculty or group of students I will tell you about my class. We have a very active social committee in my class and each semester we have about a half dozen planned class activities which usually draw 30-40 of my classmates. Out of a class of 45 that’s pretty good. I also see my classmates outside of school, more than I see some of my high school friends. We truly do see ourselves as a group and we support each other. Before papers are due our listserv email group is buzzing with emails from classmates asking for advice or suggestions. We feel close enough that we can ask for help and know that in a short time someone will respond. Whenever papers come back there is always discussion in the society room and it is not rare to see swapping of papers so that we can help our fellow classmates see where they might have gone wrong, or to see what they wrote that obviously was right on target.

Our group dynamic is very important when any kind of conflict arises between a classmate and a professor. Our peer support is unbelievable, when one person has a problem it can quickly become a class problem. We also try our hardest to be supportive and helpful for each other. For example, if I was to email a professor with a question and I think the answer would help the class, I will forward it to the listserv. We are a cohesive unit and we strive to have every member succeed. While there is some natural competition when it comes to grades, the majority of the time, we are supporting each other every step of the way and we become legitimately concerned when one member begins to fall behind.
5. **We are technologically savvy.**

The creation of our listserv has been both a blessing and a curse. It has allowed us to share information on mass scales; however it also means that it takes very little effort to fill up our inboxes around assignment times. It is normal to receive an upwards of 60 or 70 emails a day when there is a big paper due. I clearly cannot read them all, but I make an honest effort to read most.

Our listserv has also given us an academic edge. For example one of my classmates typed up 15 pages of definitions for a final exam and she then sent it out to the class. She did it because she didn’t want the rest of us to waste time typing them when she had already done the work. She also did it as a way to ‘one up’ our professor. At times our class takes on a mob mentality and it feels like it is us against the professors and administration. By sending out the definitions, she was in a lot of ways ensuring that our class would excel. We share information at a speed that rivals anything that CBC or CNN can produce. 45 people sharing information can be a pretty powerful thing. Networking is an understatement.

So where does this leave you? For many of you, my generation remains a mystery and I cannot imagine that we are an easy group to teach. We may come across as cocky and lacking respect but behind this there is a need to be heard. We also want to hear your life experiences because deep down we are all anxious of what the future might be for us. Just remember that we are a group who has grown up in an uncertain world, who look to you to help be a part of securing a positive university experience.

**From Vision and Voice: A New Story to be Crafted**

Students have always been unique. This is not new. What is new is the increased recognition of the academy on such individual differences or voices. Seeking new ways to first understand the student and then to have them understand the faculty imperative requires more deliberate and integrated approaches to teaching. The current vision/profile of Canadian students in higher education reflects an increasing participation rate of students (especially female students),
increasing tuition fees and debt load, and increasing competition for professional programs. This is accompanied by trends which indicate growing diversity in students: 1) increased participation rates of aboriginal students; 2) increased recruitment of international students; 3) increased disclosure and requirements to support students with disabilities; 4) increased number of students working full and part time to fund education; 5) increased pressure for job and career preparation and theory practical connect in learning; and 6) increased competitiveness among undergraduates as they plan for graduate education options. The Y Generation characterized as racially and ethically diverse, independent, empowered, future focused, and technically savvy add an important contextual layer to the proceeding view. Recognition of intricacies and interdependence of both vision and voice of the learner is critical to today’s educators. Student voices introduce a powerful and insightful critique of learning expectations. Educators’ assumptions regarding curriculum design, course communication, course delivery and evaluation can only be enhanced through listening to Y Generation learners and forging productive partnerships with them in the learning process.

References


