Advancing the Debate around ‘Millennials’

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“We need to remember across generations that there is as much to learn as there is to teach.”
Gloria Steinem

Abstract

The singularity of the generation of students entering the education system today has excited recent attention of educators and animated debates among education analysts. Yet, the analytical inquiry of the millennial literature discloses a clear mismatch between the confidence with which assertions about the young generation are made and the evidence for such assertions. It seems that much of the debate about the special educational needs of these people has been stimulated by Marc Prensky’s initial remarks on ‘digital natives’ and ‘digital immigrants’ since 2001. Termed ‘millennials’, ‘digital natives’ or the ‘Net generation’, these young people are said to have been absorbed by technology, which imbued them with refined technical skills, sophisticated needs and learning preferences for which traditional education is unprepared. For Prensky (2001) today’s students are different in that they think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors. It is argued in this paper that these pretentious claims and ambitious generalizations made education commentators about this generation need more empirical evidence before they could function as the starting point for any prospective reforms of the education system, in our country, at least.

Keywords:
Millennials, Generation specialists, technological skills, helicopter parenting, optimistic, confidence.
Introduction

Education analysts have lately been making extravagant allegations about an idiosyncratic generation of millennial students, who enjoy advanced technological skills, and who have peculiar traits and learning preferences for which today's education is not equipped. This has, according to these researchers, rendered educational institutions at all levels irrelevant and outdated. However, I believe that the nuance of imminent catastrophe which has flooded this debate can be easily discredited, being based on pretentiously pompous generalizations and assumptions rather than logical arguments. I believe only a deeper examination of the nature of the 'debate' itself will offer some clues.

Some of the impending questions in this respect are the following:

- Do all these young people fit the image of tech-savvy digital natives?
- Are millennials really identical to each other all over the world, as generation specialists argue?
- Do millennials go through the same development phases everywhere in the world?
- Is the cultural background of millennials- including religion, socio-economic status, origin, race,... - really secondary to technology and the Internet in shaping this generation?

On Identifying Millennials

The ‘millennial’ discourse (Howe & Strauss, 2000) is shaded by alternative designations. In effect, millennials are named differently by different researchers, yet with a relatively overwhelming insistence on technology and the Internet as defining elements of this generation. They are born between the years 1981 and 2000 (Howe & Strauss, 2003), and are 'digital natives' for Prensky (2001), ‘Net Generation’ (Oblinger, 2003), ‘Generation Y’ (Ad Age, 1993), ‘Technological Generation’ (Monereo 2004), ‘Google Generation’ (JISC, 2008), and ‘Generation Me’ (Twenge, 2006) e-generation (Krause, 2007).

While the term millennial has become popular in public discussions and web marketing debates, more particularly, it has been ferociously countered for the scarcity of scholarly research on the issue. Advocates of this postulation have a tendency to assign broad characteristics to a whole generation (Bennet et al., 2008). This group of millennial aficionados is referred to as Net Gen advocates in this paper. Sympathizers with the millennial thesis have embellished this young generation, claiming that they are in possession of an infinite list of exceptional attributes. For some, millennials are technology savvy, eager to learn, and confident in their lives (Elliott, 2009). They are “motivated, goal-oriented, assertive, and confident” (Gleason, 2008 p. 3). In addition, (Zemke et al., 2000) claim that millennials expect change and are likely to be comfortable with it (p. 54). They also believe their success will translate into success for their environment and society as a whole" (McAlister, 2009, p. 14). Besides, for devotees of the millennial thesis, these young people, updating profiles, taking selfies, sharing music, posting photos, pointing to news, bookmarking stories and plying new networks are creators par excellence (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). What’s more, with so many technological tools available in the lives of these young people, millennials are masters at multitasking (McAlister, 2009). Thus, from this limited list of exclusively positive qualities assigned to millennials, one can deduce that the portrait that is drawn to this generation by Net Gen advocates seems to be sturdily exaggerated and is, consequently, legitimately questionable.

Unsurprisingly, however, there is a growing body of academic research that has questioned the validity of the generational appraisal of millennials. So, even if young people happen to be
radically different in the ways they access, comprehend and apply information, Net Gen skeptics do not deem it is a generational fact. Besides, Net Gen skeptics are dubious about the pretentious profile of millennials depicted by the aficionados of this generation. Besides, for some unsympathetic skeptics, millennials are the dumbest generation ever (Bauerlein, 2008); their brains are “digitally-hardwired from toddler-hood, often at the expense of neural circuitry that controls one-on-one people skills” (Small & Vorgan, 2008:2). Millennials have parents who served as advocates for them, creating a dependency on parental involvement and guidance (Zemke et al, 2000). They are entitled and pushy because they are accustomed to “get what they want right now” (Zemke et al., 2000: 54). As students, millennials value comfort and informality over rules and deadlines (Manly & Thomas 2009), but still “expect good grades” (Murphy, 2010). On the other hand, skeptics are doubtful about the millennials’ creativity online in that they claim like Palfrey & Gasser that “not all Digital Natives are participating in the creative renaisance that is happening online” (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008: 113). In sum, zealous Net Gen skeptics either express negative judgments towards millennials or they deny the existence of such a generation, at all.

Objective of the study
The main objective of this research is to question the core idea of many generational demographers and education specialists which claims that “Millennials worldwide are more similar to one another than to older generations within their nations due to globalization, social media, the exporting of Western culture, and the speed of change.” (Stein, 2013:1). The purpose of this paper is to investigate the validity of the key claims made about Millennials in the literature by surveying 741 undergraduate students in two Moroccan universities: the schools of Letters and Human Sciences of Fes and Meknes.

Research Questions
The questions addressed in this paper are the following:

- Are our students really tech-savvy?
- Do they have helicopter parents?
- Do they expect their teachers to be paternalistic?
- Do they have the same priorities and dreams as Western millennials?

Method of Selection & tools
This paper is reporting a significant part of the results of a field work I conducted in a quest for knowledge about how to improve my instruction and positively influence my millennial students. The participants were chosen through purposive (judgment) sampling. The group involved is not a faithful subset of the larger population of Moroccan millennials, but these participants serve a very specific purpose, which is discovering more about the cohort of students enrolling in our department and school of humanities, today. More specifically, information was elicited from 741 students:

- 393 in department of English Studies in Meknes (S5: 150, S3: 132, S1: 111)

The answer rate was more than satisfactory (85.96%): out of 741 participants, 637 submitted their questionnaires relatively answered.

Findings and discussions
The majority of my informants are between 17 and 20 years old (458), and the number of males (332) slightly exceeds the number of females (305). The first part of the questionnaire is an inquiry about the participants’ preference, knowledge and use of digital technologies in
their studies and social activities. To the question “When have you had your first mobile phone?” 38.61% claimed that they were introduced to technology during their first year of high school and 32.49% later in their last year. The remaining 15% said they had had access to technology even before and the remaining group reported their recent access to a mobile phone during their first year at the university.

Then a direct question was asked for the sake of discovering participants’ opinions about the importance of the Internet in their lives. Here are some of their answers to the question: “how essential is technology to your education?”

- Without internet life would be unbearable.
- The Internet has made life easier.
- Most teachers are using the Internet to help them with their course material.
- If you don’t attend class regularly, you can watch YouTube videos on the topic.
- You can find also friends on the Net.

From this set of replies, one can deduce that technology (at least smartphones) is available to all participants, and that the Internet is undoubtedly deemed vital by these people, both as an educational tool and for private purposes.

Given that technology is a must have for all participants, I decided to dig deeper into the relationship that they have with ICT, and test the validity of the claim saying that this generation is tech-savvy. Highly technical questions were formulated by the help of a computer science specialist and addressed to my informants, and the answers were surprisingly interesting. First here are the questions asked:

- Do you know the makeup of a computer inside out?
- Have you done any web programming (Html 5, Javascript, CSS,...)?
- Do you know how to navigate your way through operating systems?
- Do you know what these terms stand for, UNIX, Linux, Mac OS X, Novell NetWare, and BSD?
- Are you fascinated with new technology?

To the first question, only 39 students responded positively while the big majority (305) did not know, and the others did not answer at all. Besides, when asked “Have you done any web programming (Html 5, Javascript, CSS,...)?”, the greatest number of students (495) acknowledged they did not know any web programming language; whereas, 45 said they have done web programming, and 97 did not provide any answer.

When asked, “Do you know how to navigate your way through operating systems?” 488 said they did not while 149 claimed they knew. To test the validity of these replies, I posed the same question differently asking them whether they knew the meaning of five of the most famous operating systems in the market, namely UNIX, Linux, Mac OS X, Novell NetWare, and BSD. Expectedly enough, a minority (124) said they knew these are examples of operating systems, but most of them acknowledged that they didn’t know how these software function.

The last question in this section is meant to determine how fascinated with technology the participants in this study are. To my surprise, the majority either was not really enchanted (392) or did not express any opinion at all (124). On the other hand, 268 students revealed they were captivated by novelty in the world of technology.

The second axis of the questionnaire is intended to investigate the participants’ opinion and use of technology for educational purposes. In this respect, most participants confessed they checked the Web extensively for school research and revision (90%). More particularly, the answers to the question “how essential is technology to your education?” uncover a general consensus among respondents as to the instrumental educational role of technology.

- Technology is education.
- I like how my smartphone can replace my teacher.
The next most decisive characteristic assigned to millennials in the literature is their overreliance on a parental figure in their lives. In effect, the literature is replete with ideas concerning millennials’ “helicopter parents” (Weber, 2016), who serve as advocates for them. These parents, as Howe (2016) describes them, are “sometimes helpful, sometimes annoying, yet always hovering over their children and making noise.” The Millennials know they are wanted and protected by their parents (Strauss & Howe, 2000); that’s why, they view their parents as a positive and available source of advice; they “want mom and dad to help them through the tough (and easy) decisions” (Rainer & Rainer, 2011:57).

To check whether this idea is true for the sample of millennials involved in this study, I invited them to answer three questions related to their relationship with their parents. To the first one, “how many phone calls do you receive (a day) from your parents when you are out?” 266 students admitted to receive none, 269 received at least one phone call from their parents each day. The minority (102), however, confessed that their parents called them more than twice a day.

To the second question “how much do your parents know about your studies?” it seems that there is a big number of participants whose parents are not totally directly involved in their education: 236 said that their parents did not know enough about their studies, 25 said that their parents had no information concerning their studies, and the last group (87) said that they were not sure whether their parents had any such knowledge or not.

To the last question, verifying whether the participants share the same values with their parents or not, only a small number of participants (128) acknowledged they had a completely different value system than their parents. The others, on the other hand, believed they had relatively similar values with their parents.

Returning back to the helicopter parenting thesis adopted as a key factor in defining millennials. For advocates of this idea, parents of millennials want their children and let them know both overtly and indirectly. They keep telling them and making them feel they are special and that they deserve the best of love, care, support and entitlement. As a result, when in school, millennials look forward to the same care and support from their teachers and in case their expectations are not fulfilled they get disappointed (Oblinger, 2003), dissatisfied (Levin & Arafeh, 2002), and disengaged (Prensky, 2005).

The aim of the subsequent question is to test the assumption about millennials’ tendency to be more over dependent on their tutors than their predecessors:

“do you imagine to learn in a system where teachers are inexistent; they have been replaced by technology?”

The answers were varied, but the huge majority maintained the importance of the teacher’s physical presence in their education. Some of them “can’t imagine learning without a teacher” and even proposed arguments that are not related to the primary functional role of teachers as transmitters of knowledge. One of my informants said, “the teacher can laugh with you.”, another added, “If you need to apologize for something, the computer can’t
“understand.” Very few participants, however, assumed technology can make up for the absence of teachers “it will make learning easier”. Below are some sample answers to this question.

- Then our life will change.
- No, teachers are very important.
- With tech I don’t need a teacher.
- Computers can never replace humans.
- No, the teacher can laugh with you, but the computer cannot.
- Students need teachers.
- I can’t imagine learning without a teacher.
- No, we need teachers.
- No, if you need to apologize for something, the computer can’t understand.
- It will be easier to learn.
- We need more technology.

To fathom more the issue, students were given a list of statements characterizing potential roles of the teacher and asked them to choose the four most important reactions (in order, of course) they expect from their teacher.

“Choose the four most important things you expect from your teacher”:

a. Will help me
b. Give me straight feedback
c. Will push me forward
d. Will treat me like a son/daughter
e. Will be tolerant with me
f. Will give me more information
g. Will listen to my opinions
h. Will not judge me
i. Will advise me
j. Will allow me to ask him questions online
k. Will punish my wrong doing

From the answers, it seems that the majority of students hope that their tutors embrace parental traits since (34%) ranked “will treat me like a son/daughter,” first, (24%) ranked “will push me forward,” first. On the other side, the originally primary role of the teacher is downgraded as only (9%) ranked “will give me more information,” first. Similarly, when asked “do you think you receive enough care from your teachers?” 155 participants said they were satisfied with the “maximum care” they got from their teachers while 242 students supposed they got only a minimum amount of teachers’ care. 190 students assumed, on the other hand, their teachers did not care about them, and 50 others claimed they did not have any idea at all.

The last element covered by this study is related to participants’ dreams and priorities. Most generation theory specialists claim that millennials are highly confident and optimistic about their future and the future of the world (Zemke et al. 2000). They are said to be rather philanthropic and care about the future of life on earth. In fact, a large scale survey conducted by the World Economic Forum in 2013 reported that 82% of global millennials believe their generation can improve the world.

To check the validity of such claims, I gave my respondents a multiple choice question with four potential visions about the future. Two of them are rather personal “become rich” and “become famous” and the other two are rather global “poverty disappears” and “people
become equal”. Unlike the claims contained in the literature, which assert that millennials are convinced their future is the nation’s future (Strauss & Howe’s, 2003), the best part of my respondents does not. In fact, (408) dream of becoming rich, and (198) hope to become famous, like their famous reality show actors, YouTube artists and well-known football players. There is a group, however, 50 participants, who seem to be more altruistic, hoping poverty will disappear and 52 said that equity between people is a leitmotif in their dreams.

Implications of the study
It is true that although the surveyed college students can be said to gravitate toward wired activity, they admitted they were not really particularly in line with technology avant-gardes. That’s why, it seems that the participants’ use of digital technologies is less complex than it has been portrayed in the literature. In effect, a good proportion of survey respondents indicated they used digital technologies more for communication and information sharing than for creative purposes. In sum, the rhetoric that millennials are tech-savvy, being digital natives (Prensky, 2001), is not supported in our context. The millennial sample covered in this study is not totally identical to the millennials overseas, having limited knowledge of the technicalities of hardware and software. Yet, our millennials spend a lot of time online and rely extensively on the Internet; that’s why, they might be considered as Net savvy.

Besides, it is believed by many generation demographers that millennials feel relatively closer to their parents and are largely appreciative of adults’ extra protection. Similarly, most of the surveyed students craved exceptional coaching, care and consideration from their teachers; most presumed that their teachers should be in loco parentis.

As a result, teachers (and administrators, alike) should have “empathy for our students to as a high a degree as possible” Prensky (2012a), creating a student-friendly campus where everyone will feel secure and authentically invaluable. The most precious contribution a teacher can offer students is to help each of them find their passion, highlight it, and make them feel valuable for it. Teachers who are able to do this will be able to have an enormously powerful impact in the lives of their students. (Prensky, 2012b)

Last, but not least, since it seems that the millennials surveyed are less confident in their capacity to make the world a better place than global millennials, a benevolent educational system with a compassionate faculty is likely to help them regain confidence in themselves and in the world around them. Equally important, the majority of students may risk disillusionment on entering into adulthood with unrealistic expectations and pretentious dreams about their future if nobody helps them to regain the reality of hard work and perseverance.

Conclusions
As a conclusion, many of the claims made about the educational preferences of millennial students and their technological skills have been based on speculations and are anecdotal in nature. Thus, without critical rational talk little progress can be made towards a bona fide debate about millennials. First, we should insist on the lack of empirical evidence of the claims made by Net Gen advocates and dismiss the existence of a homogeneous group of millennials all over the world. Second, to assign a particular learning style or even general preferences to a whole generation is thus hard to believe. However, there are some general inclinations and preferences which happen to be shared by the majority of the surveyed sample; that’s why, it would be erroneous to overlook them. Consequently, given the significant individual differences among millennial learners, one-size-fits-all teaching approach will never be effective. In this respect, further research is needed to investigate the
factors- apart from technology- that influence this generation’s goals, emotions and values and reactions to norms.
All in all, I believe neither nonchalant skepticism nor unsuspecting advocacy enable a full understanding of the direction that educational change should take. The point is that change is imminent, yet the reason why is not just the changing nature of students; other elements have to be included, such as the global and local educational, political, managerial climates.

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