

Teaching Notes for Physicians

Mind the Gap: Teaching across the generations

A generation is a peer group that experienced a common history at the same stage of life, and is shaped by major events of the day. Just as fish don't discover water, we remain unaware of the characteristics of our own generation.(1)

Background

Although each person is unique, shared experiences in childhood and early working years distinguish one generational cohort from another and can influence attitudes to authority and to work ethic, expectations, and aspirations(2). Longer working lives, changes in retirement benefit plans, and today's flattened organizational hierarchies mean up to four generations may be working together at one time. Generational diversity can be a source of misunderstanding, judgements, and friction, when members of different cohorts falsely assume that their attitudes and values are shared by all(3).

Four generational cohorts

Cohort	Birth years	Influences
Traditionals	1920-1940	Great Depression, WWII, heroes, hard work and sacrifice, family values
Boomers	1941-1960	Prosperity, idealism, civil rights, heroes debunked, TV
Gen X	1961-1981	Latchkey children, tight job markets, growing diversity, personal computers
Gen Y	1981-2000	Affluence, family values, global village, connected 24/7, AIDS, terrorism, Columbine

Generalizations about cohort differences are based on empirical observation, and are not as rigidly demarcated as the table suggests; but understanding how life experiences can affect work ethics and influence our workplace behaviours can help us to teach more effectively, reduce frustrations with coworkers, and make best use of the spectrum of strengths that generational diversity can bring to our health care teams.

Traditionals

Traditionals worked hard and made tremendous personal sacrifices for the greater good. Raised in a time of austerity, the practice of fiscal caution, rule following, loyalty, and respect for authority figures and following the chain of command meant survival and success. Those who are still at work (likely to be in very senior positions now) look to established processes when solving new problems; they value hard work, and expect seniority to be respected.

STRENGTHS:

- Hard workers
- Experienced, wise
- Committed, loyal, respect hierarchy
- Follow rules, protocols
- Pay attention to detail
- Process-orientated

POTENTIAL CLASH POINTS:

- Inflexible, "this is how it's done"
- Resistant to new technologies
- Perceive modern communication styles to be disrespectful
- Fiscally conservative

Baby Boomers

Born into post-war prosperity, Boomers are the largest cohort at 80 million strong(1); two thirds of today's workers are estimated to be Boomers(4). They were cherished children, raised in an era of civil rights activism, and taught to question established order mistrust authority by a media that delighted in exposing leaders' foibles (think Watergate, Vietnam). Boomers are idealistic, believing that they can effect change by working together. The size of this cohort and the growing number of women entering the workforce meant that many Boomers had to move away from family and home to find jobs; family structures were redefined, work became a major source of identity, and Boomers became increasingly competitive to remain in work.

STRENGTHS:

- Idealistic, optimistic, nonconformist
- Loyal, dutiful, workaholic
- Independent but strong peer bonds
- Pragmatic problem-solvers
- Great mentors, consensus seekers

POTENTIAL CLASH POINTS:

- Little respect for authority, seniority
- 'Me' generation, want immediate gratification
- Competitive, challenging
- Some resist new technology

Generation X

Many were latchkey children, born into single parent or two-career households, and often equal participants in household decision-making. They developed strong peer support networks and learned to be independent problem-solvers from an early age. Seeing their parents made redundant has made them wary about job security, and they move jobs readily. Gen Xers expect a supportive, progressive work environment that offers them flexibility to build stable family lives and enjoy leisure time. They continue to train to remain employable (portable careers), and are loyal to the career rather than the job.

STRENGTHS:

- Individualistic, flexible, resourceful
- Need little supervision
- Strong peer friendships, loyal
- Work hard, results orientated
- Technologically capable
- Keep current, continually training
- Value life-work balance

POTENTIAL CLASH POINTS:

- Will question authority and rules
- Little loyalty, change jobs easily
- Individualistic, don't think 'team'
- Give opinions readily
- Impatient with group process

Generation Y (or Why?)

With the return of family values, parents were heavily involved in their busy Gen Y children's lives. This cohort has grown up being praised and told they could achieve anything if they worked hard enough. Modern technology has streamed global news to Gen Y from an early age and kept them in constant contact with friends and relatives (texting, Twitter, FaceBook, etc.); consequently, these are socially conscious citizens who build supportive networks of friends and virtual family. Highly educated, ethnically diverse, technologically adept and collaborative, Y is hailed by some as the next Great Hero generation(2).

STRENGTHS:

- Loyal (but expect many job moves)
- Respectful, patriotic, socially active
- Collaborative, supportive
- Value life-work balance
- Work hard, outcome orientated
- Technological 'mediavores'

POTENTIAL CLASH POINTS:

- Question everything, everyone
- Assertive, easily bored
- Need structure, feedback, supervision
- Don't tolerate inefficiency

Teaching Generation Y

Characteristics to be aware of:

1. Technophiliacs!
2. Connected 24/7
3. Collaborators
4. Need to make a difference
5. Need a reason ('Why?')
6. Like challenge
7. Like to direct their own learning
8. Want structure, orientation, supervision
9. Value immediate feedback, frequently
10. Won't sacrifice life for work

Technology

A sea of laptop lids isn't intended to be discourteous; asking techno-loving Gen Y learners to close their computers can make them uncomfortable, and even present a barrier to learning. Instead, turn this Net Generation habit to your advantage, by inviting learners to enrich the group with on-the-spot research. Individuals might enjoy bringing your technological abilities up to date, if this interests you.

Connected

Instant messaging can be useful for coordinating schedules etc., but don't be slow to ask learners not to text during teaching time. Recent findings suggest that even Gen Y cannot effectively multitask. Texting and chat rooms don't build superior writing skills: refer those who need help to the Writing Centre on main campus. When questions arise during small groups, try assigning them to an individual who must email the answers to you and to the group. You'll know that the work has been done, and everyone gets the correct answer.

Teamwork

Good teamwork skills are vital in today's health care environment, so encourage problem solving in teams wherever feasible. Try small group and lecturing techniques that encourage student interactivity, such as buzz groups, debating, and carousels(5,6).

Work has meaning

Prioritize and make the relevance of what you are teaching absolutely explicit. Give learners a chance to participate legitimately in patient care, however peripherally, and under supervision.

Why?

Generation Y aren't being impertinent when they question you, or accepted knowledge and process. Turning questions back to the group can stimulate discussion from which students will learn, and learn also to ask themselves 'Why?'; the foundation for effective lifelong self-directed learning.

Give us a challenge

Rather than focussing on process, give learners a desired outcome then let them choose how they will get there, whenever practical. They enjoy using their knowledge and practising their new skills.

Negotiated learning

Content in medicine is not negotiable, but the learning process is. Respect Gen Y learners' need to be involved in their own education by inviting them to identify their knowledge gaps and skills deficiencies.

Feedback(7)

Asking learners to self-assess, then compare with your assessment, will help them to identify learning needs with increasing accuracy; a vital skill for members of a self-regulating profession. Don't be offended if learners give their feedback; it is offered as a gift, to be acted upon or ignored as you choose. We can all learn from effective and informed comment on our performance.

Balance

Generation Y learners have a huge capacity for hard work but won't stay after hours, as they don't equate endurance with excellence. Take care with your timing when you can, but do make it explicit that willingness to work out of hours is an expectation and sometimes a necessity for many in this profession.

Working across the Generation Gap

Respect is the foundation for healthy working relations, but it is quickly eroded when generational differences are judged as personality flaws, or as weaknesses that are absent from one's own cohort.

Understanding the origins of the generation gap can preclude false assumptions; consider finding out about your coworkers' or learners' work ethics, expectations, and aspirations. What do you need to tell them about the work characteristics of your own generation? Recognize and acknowledge potential flash points, and try to address your differences with humour.

The Generation Y resident who just excused herself half way through clinic to get her legs waxed may not understand why her Baby Boomer preceptor interprets this as a gross lack of commitment / altruism. The resident works flat out and to the best of her ability while she is on duty, but to her, 'me-time' is sacrosanct. Generation Y has redefined altruism as a *team* responsibility to the primacy of patient care, believing that maintaining a healthy life-work balance will help them to be better physicians.

As a Baby Boomer, you find juniors who pipe up in meetings to be loud, arrogant and even disrespectful. Realize that these youngsters have been taught to try and make a contribution in this way, even when they are juniors and speak from a lower knowledge level. Invite them to speak up!

As a Generation Y learner, you find it frustrating when the Department Head ignores emails, rarely gives feedback, and communicates only in person or on paper. Members of the Traditional generation may not be comfortable with the latest technology so make sure that your concise emails are respectfully worded and follow etiquette; better still, try a telephone call, or write a letter. Is your relationship sufficiently good for you to offer some coaching on computer use?

Enjoy your teaching!

For further information or confidential no-charge teaching consultations, contact us:

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Reference list

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- (2) **Duchscher JE, Cowin L. Multigenerational nurses in the workplace. *J Nursing Admin* 2004;34(10):493-501**
- (3) **Strauss W, Howe N. *Generations: The history of America's future, 1584-2069*. New York: Morrow; 1991**
- (4) **Zemke R, Raines C, Filipczak B. *Generations at work: Managing the clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers and Nexters in your workplace*. New York: AMACOM; 2000**
- (5) **Office of Faculty Development. *Facilitating small group work. Teaching Notes for Physicians series*. Available from www.ucalgary.ca/OFD**
- (6) **Office of Faculty Development. *Lecturing for effective learning. Teaching Notes for Physicians series*. Available from www.ucalgary.ca/OFD**
- (7) **Office of Faculty Development. *Giving feedback that enhances learning. Teaching Notes for Clinicians series*. Available from www.ucalgary.ca/OFD**