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The Multiple Generations in Adult and Higher Education Classrooms: What We Assume, What We Know, What We Can Learn, and What May Be Missing

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The purpose of this paper is to gain greater understandings of the "generation" literature as it relates to adult learners in higher and adult education contexts. We also analyze the literature from a critical perspective, considering how the literature attends to issues of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual identity.

Malcolm Knowles (1980) provides descriptors of adult learners as self-directed; however, his notions paint a generic picture of adult learners that may not address other aspects of learners, such as their generational cohort. In recent years, researchers (i.e. Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007) have introduced the idea of differences in various generations and how they play out in adult or higher education classrooms. Elam, Stratton, and Gibson (2007) define generations as "a specific time period and shared experiences" (pg. 21) that, along with common influences, such as people, places or events, may shape generational cultural values and behaviors. Understanding research and literature concerning the different generations may help inform adult educators to better understand, educate, and address the needs of the adult learners who populate our educational institutions and contexts. The purpose of this roundtable paper is to gain a greater understanding of the literature concerning various generations as it relates to adult learners in higher and adult education, exploring its relationship to adult learning in various contexts. Our secondary purpose, however, is to analyze the literature from a critical perspective, considering how the literature attends to issues of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual identity.

Synopsis of the Literature: In today's adult education classrooms three generational cohorts may be participating in the same educational experiences. Typical depictions of these generations are the Baby-boomers, the Generation Xers, and the Millennials. The Baby-boomers' birth years span from 1946 to 1964 and are defined by the space race, civil rights movement, Vietnam, and Watergate. The Generation Xer's, who were born in the mid 1960's to the early1980's, experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall, the emergence of AIDS, and the Internet (Oblinger, 2003). The most recent generational cohort, the "Millennial" or "Nintendo" generation (Stanford & Reeves, 2007) were born after 1982. The Millennials are more biracial or multiracial than are previous generations, with 20% of them having at least one parent who is an immigrant (Broido, 2004). Part of the problem with understanding these groups is the discrepancies in titles that various authors use to describe the generations. Lowery (2004) uses the title "Thirteenth Generation" for "Generation X," and "Baby-boomers" may also now be referred to as "Helicopter Parents".

Generational learning preferences: In their research Cambiano, De Vore, and Harvey (2001) discovered differences of preferred teaching techniques/pedagogies for the three generations. The Baby-boomers expressed a need for hands-on learning activities using three-dimensional and manipulative materials. Generation Xer's need carefully laid out plans of what is expected of them in the learning situation, including knowing future assignments the parameters of each lesson, and the sequential steps involved in all assignments, with the instructor leaving nothing to interpretation. Millennials prefer teamwork, experiential activities,

structure, and the use of technology. Their strengths include multitasking, goal orientation, positive attitudes and collaborative style (Oblinger, 2003). Stanford and Reeves (2007) address the issue of incorporating technology in the adult classroom, encouraging educators to develop technology skills and learn how to teach using technology that is appropriate for the content of the course and the generations in the classroom.

 Concerns with generational research: In addition to confusing and conflicting titles for generations, some of the literature we examined seems to not be empirical research but opinion-based writing, which nevertheless seems to become part of the "data" concerning generations and influence much of what we assume about the differences and similarities between the generations who populate our classrooms. In addition, much of the writing concerning the different generations seems to assume that all individual members of each cohort have equal levels of financial, personal, and social support. Race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability all affect how individuals have access to educational opportunities.

 Unanswered Questions: Much of the literature concerning different generations is undeveloped and requires further empirical research. Future generational research could focus on some of the following questions: What does the literature tell us about the various generations, and what are the similarities and differences among the generations? What can adult educators do to meet the learning needs of the multi-generational and diverse mix of students in higher and adult education settings? How does the generational literature represent gender, race, ethnic, class and sexual identity issues? How do adult learning theories, such as transformational learning, fit into what the literature tells us about the different generations and their learning preferences? Through asking these questions, we hope to promote discussions that will further our knowledge of meeting the needs of different generations of adult learners. Understanding the different generations present in adult learning contexts may help us move beyond the generic portraits of adult learners to considerations of the mosaic of generations that are present today in educational institutions so we may better provide the educational environments and learning experiences they require to be successful.

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