

Generation X: Who Are They? What Do They Want?

By Janelle L. Wilson

We hear a lot of talk about today's student—often contrasted to, say, the student of the 1970s.

The '70s student, we new professors hear, was well read, disciplined, and cared about learning for the sake of learning, unlike the more apathetic and even clueless student today.

Peter Sacks, in his book, *Generation X Goes To College*, tells the story of a day when he was collecting assignments and one of his students said, "I've had a cold all week, and so I don't have any taste-buds. I can't taste the food. Do I still have to do the assignment?"¹

Conrad Kottak points to the increasing tendency for students to enter and leave classrooms at will.² Indeed, many professors could share some pretty intriguing stories along these lines.

But, in this article, rather than lamenting the loss of some ideal prototypical student from the past, I'd like us to consider the situation

that our students find themselves in today.

Noting similarities between "Baby Boomers" and "Generation Xers," as well as misinformation that the latter have about what the '60s were *really* like, Raymond Gozzi asks: "How different are they?"³

This article is, in part, a response to Gozzi's question. I suppose, as a member of this generation myself, I have a vested interest in how the generation is portrayed. But, more importantly, as professors who want to make our fields meaningful and relevant to students, I think we all need to gain some understanding of where our students are "coming from."

Different dates have been suggested for the era of the Xer—for some it's those born between 1961-1981, for others, it's 1965-1980.

In terms of general characteristics, this generation lacks a defining life event. This generation cannot necessarily expect to experience

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If time travel were possible most students would choose to go back to the past—to the '50s or '60s.

intergenerational social mobility. This generation faces the burden of paying Baby Boomers' Social Security. This, of course, is the MTV generation.

Incidentally, two of my honors students⁴ did a content analysis of currently popular rock music videos for their senior honors project. Some of the categories:

- “holocaustal”—videos that recreate images of Hitler and the Nazi concentration camps.
- “video abstraction”—the use of superimposed images, rapid film cuts between scenes, and unusual camera techniques
- “bizarre”—videos in which behavior and appearances are strikingly odd, including, for example, the use of costumes or masks that appear to have no relevance to the lyrics of the song.

And consider some of the names of contemporary rock groups: Garbage, Social Distortion, Fun Lovin' Criminals, Smashing Pumpkins.

A sense of doom or pessimism clings to this generation. Where is the youthful hope, idealism, excitement, and interest that we would expect among people at this stage in life?

Data that I have gathered at two different Midwestern universities suggest that, rather than being oriented to the future, Gen Xers express nostalgia for the past.

I asked a convenience sample of contemporary college students this question: “If you could step into a time machine and press any year to go to—forward or backward in time—what year would you pick?”

The majority of students chose the past. The 1960s and the 1950s were the most popular decades.

Students chose the 1950s because of the association with a more safe, relaxed, stress-free life.

Consider such responses:

I would choose 1953 because everything seemed perfect and innocent in the '50s. The Cleavers were living the perfect life. The music of that decade was about bikinis and love—innocent things. Now music is harsh and its topic is murder, drugs—sad and depressing things.

Another gave this reason for choosing 1955:

Our country was prosperous and jobs were ample. Families were strong. Citizens had a solid belief in our country after WWII. Technology was making everyone's lives a little simpler and easier. Our country wasn't overwrought with violence and drugs.

The reasons given for choosing

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the 1960s revolved around the perception of the 1960s as a time of real social change, a time when it was okay to be lost and confused.

A couple of quotes:

I'd love to go back to the '60s because that was when people actually opened their eyes to how screwed up the government really was and still is. There was love in the air, lots of good drugs, and the Grateful Dead had just begun. Also, there was no AIDS and everybody was having sex. Finally, I would've spent 3 days at the Woodstock Mud Pit because that would've been the most exciting moment of my life.

I would have loved to have been a part of the Civil Rights Movement. It seems to me that the people who fought for their rights in that era were passionate, dedicated, and more in touch with humanity. Not much active protest goes on these days, or at least nothing that is comparable to the '60s. I feel like I missed out on a chance to voice my opinion and truly affect social change.

I find it interesting that people express nostalgia for times not even known to them firsthand. Tom Vanderbilt³ calls this phenomenon "displaced nostalgia."

As the Boomers age, we see more and more products aimed at them—the largest segment of our population. Indeed, they represent the largest group of consumers in American society. Thus, Xers find themselves consuming Boomer nostalgia.

As part of the course requirements, students in my Social Psychology class write journal entries. One of my students wrote an entry in response to a class exercise that involved analyzing stereotypes and attitudes in commercials.

He commented on commercials directed at Gen Xers:

Take the commercial for the soft drink Surge ... The commercial shows a bunch of so-called Gen-Xers, getting ready to compete in some 'extreme' competitions. With their eyes on the prize they jump over couches, climb huge mountains of mud, and roll down grassy hills in barrels all in the name of an ultra-cool soda. Well let's face it, the youth of today have nothing better to do than compete for a can of sugar.

This notion that members of Generation X have nothing better to do than "compete for a can of sugar" reflects a string of contemporary advertisements that provide cute, catchy statements about life—that make our lives look

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empty and meaningless, as if none of us have better things to do than to consume products as ends in themselves.

Nissan says that “Life is a journey. Enjoy the ride.” Gatorade asserts that “Life is a sport. Drink it up.” In an effort to promote its credit card, Shell presents itself as “moving at the speed of life.” No need for the consumer to ponder the deep, philosophical questions. The answers are packaged and presented by marketers trying to make money.

Generation Xers came of age during the rise of dual-career families, effective birth control, increasing national debt, and increasing awareness of the deterioration of the environment. Forty percent of Gen Xers are kids of divorce—thus, they have had to depend more on secondary relationships like teachers and day care providers.

Yet, rather than evoking sympathy, members of Generation X have become a symbol of a society in decline. They are labeled slackers, whiners, the image is of a tuned-out individual, dressed in grunge, not doing a whole lot.

Are Gen Xers a bunch of irresponsible, immature, apathetic young adults? Well, let me share a quote from a 27-year-old Chicagoan:

I think like the stuff when

people talk about that whole slacker culture: How about attributing it to having been an adult at age 10? And now I’m just—I’m tired. I want to play in the sandbox. I want to sit on the couch and toss bonbons into my mouth. Like retired people when they move down to Florida. Yeah.

I swear, my apartment sometimes feels like a retirement community for people in their 20’s who don’t want to do anything. I don’t know anybody who seems really to have caught up. Maybe we’ll all get our second winds at age 32. I hope I get my second wind tomorrow.⁶

The following was sent to me from cyberspace: The top four Generation X activities:

1. Sitting around experiencing Angst, and brooding about how limited their life prospects are;
2. Complaining about how long old people are working these days before they retire;
3. Raging about how difficult it is to get a really good Cappuccino for a decent price; and
4. Bemoaning the fact that there are so few CEO positions available to very talented people without any experience.

The above is humorous, but also reflective of perhaps the most

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defining characteristic of this generation: the failure to find meaningful employment.

Many of our students work long hours each week at various jobs in order to be in college. Sociologist Frank Furstenberg's 1995 study of 3,000 households found that today's divorced parents, particularly fathers, are far less likely to help their grown children financially. Mike Males (1996) notes:

Contrary to media reports of parents supporting Generation X as never before, fewer than one-fourth of today's young adult children received money from their parents. Only 28 percent of married parents provided financial help to their adult children; only one-eighth of divorced fathers and one-fifth of divorced mothers provided aid.

Douglas Rushkoff, author of *The Gen X Reader* (1994), writes:

The largest private employer in the U.S. today is not General Motors but Manpower Inc.—a temporary employment agency. And two-thirds of all new jobs created in 1992 were temp jobs with hourly wages that have no benefits, that could not lift a family out of poverty, that have no security.⁷

Let me share a quote from

David Hoffberg, a 26-year-old New Yorker:

I think no one expects to stay at the same job for life. It's not like Japan where you bond with your company and you spend your entire working life with that company. I don't think people can rely on their company keeping them anymore, as they did in the '70s and '80s where you would, for example, stay with IBM forever. Now IBM is letting people go left and right and I think people now jump from job to job for money—and look out for themselves because they know they have to, and because you know your company isn't looking out for you anymore.

I would have preferred the old system, of course. Everyone would. There's security—a job that you can count on having unless you choose to go someplace else. I don't think anyone's looking, in their early 30's, to have to go looking around for work.⁸

Frank Sulloway's thesis, recently put forth in his book, *Born to Rebel*, is applicable here. His thesis is that laterborns in the family tend to rebel in order to find a niche in the family system.

Sulloway argues that birth

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order is the single best predictor of revolutionary creativity. Firstborns tend to become conservatives. Laterborns are more likely to become free-thinking iconoclasts. Some people are simply “born to rebel.”

As the underdogs of the family, laterborns are more inclined to identify with the downtrodden and to question the status quo. They are more open to experience because this openness aids them, as latecomers to the family, in finding an unoccupied niche. Their openness tends to make them more imaginative, creative, independent, and liberal.

I predict Sulloway’s work will be increasingly cited and tested by psychologists and sociologists who study family systems and personality. Though it has a micro focus, I wonder if there’s a similar phenomenon happening among Gen Xers. What is their place in society? Where and how do they fit? They are struggling to find a niche, and their efforts in doing so may not be viewed positively by society.

Rushkoff says:

But consider, for a moment, what it would have been like to grow up this way: we are the first generation for whom rock and roll is not a rebellion. We did not have to fight in Vietnam. We did not have to fight against

religious institutions, dress codes, or even the so-called patriarchy. The Boomers envisioned a life unfettered by the constraints of traditional morality and meaningless lineage. That we can take all this for granted is a testament to their success. Thanks, okay? But it is impossible and pointless for us to remain in idle appreciation of these political and cultural strides, and we aim instead to push the envelope a bit further ourselves. And sometimes that means taking a very different tack.⁹

My student—quoted earlier—expresses anger at the stereotypes of people in his generation. He suggests that Gen Xers are doomed because they are expected to share the Baby Boomers’ popular cultural resources and are told that the popular culture of their own generation cannot compete.

We still are bombarded with ‘Classic Rock’ and moldy oldies. Bands like the Eagles, Rolling Stones, and Aerosmith need to back off so we can define our own music, lifestyle. How can we make anything worthwhile if we are always being told that Nirvana will never be as good as the Beatles? Without a generational split we will be lulled into a submissive coma in order to let our parents pay \$75.00 for tick-

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ets to see a band that should have died when our fathers cut their hair and became the people whom you shouldn't trust because they're over 30.

Still, there are many who believe firmly that "Generation X" is not, in any major way, different from previous generations. The life events and experiences which shape those who are in their young adulthood, these folks argue, are the same for Xers as they were for prior generations when they were in that stage.

Ladd suggests that both "Generation X" and the "Baby Boomers" are mythical generations.

The twentysomethings are just young men and women, not a generation in any substantial social and political sense. The same is true of the boomers before them, and of boomers now in their middle years.¹⁰

What are commonly identified as generation markers are actually effects of age—not generation, according to Ladd.

But Mannheim's work in this area supports the assertion that the members of Generation X can indeed be considered a "generation." Mannheim notes that "generations have a social location that uniquely identifies them. The social

location of a generation arises from shared experiences."¹¹

I think it's fair to say this generation is, in many ways, quite distinct from the Baby Boom generation. As Hellenbrand (1997) suggests, many members of this generation do not have the typical luxury of participating in the standard features of the American dream—i.e., "that the future will be better, that they will own a house, that relationships will solidify into 'marriage' or some socially recognized form, that a career will materialize."

Furthermore, Hellenbrand notes that unlike previous times in this nation's past when the dream was eclipsed for the country as a whole (e.g., during the 1930s), the contemporary situation presents a paradox: "It is a land of bounty (for some of the old perhaps) and a land of deprivation and deferral for the Xers and the young ... it is one of the few moments in our history when it has been easier for the elders to 'pursue happiness' than for the young."¹²

The heroic tale of the past was that individuals start with zero and then work themselves up. Now the tale goes like this: "I start with a \$20,000 debt, and I try to work myself out of it." Furthermore, college had traditionally been a place where young adults found their mate and got married. Today this

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typically means that the couple would start \$40,000 in debt.

Student loans are a huge issue for Xers who are in college. They are faced with the unmanageability of their debt load and then they are faced with a fairly unwelcoming job market. The Xers want older people to get out of the way, but there is really a counter-pressure because the older worker may either not be replaced at all, or will be replaced with contingent workers.

The American Dream, then, is crashing; it is empty. But, as Milan Kovacovic¹³ suggests, perhaps this is positive. After all, the American Dream has been such a burden, and certainly a prime example of false consciousness. We might—by necessity—see a shift towards less consumption, a change in expectations. Some of the goals and values that were espoused by revolutionaries in the '60s—anti-materialism, anti-consumerism—may be re-born and realized by the Xer generation.

So we conclude that, yes, we do have a different type of student today—and different circumstances to deal with. Conrad Kottak, a professor of cultural anthropology, coined the term “television-conditioning” to refer to television-conditioned behavior common among our students today, due to the emergence of television as a powerful social institution.

Kottak claims that the habit of watching television has modified the behavior of those who have grown up with the tube. Kottak identifies a cultural pattern: Watching television causes people to duplicate, albeit inappropriately, in other areas of their lives, behavior styles developed while watching the tube.

Some examples: He notes that professors are, of course, bothered when students read a newspaper in class. Well, one time in a class of his, he noticed a student in the front row reading a paperback novel. He asked: “Why are you reading a book in my class?” The student’s response was: “Oh, I’m not in your class. I just came in here to read my book.”¹⁴

Kottak’s explanation: “Because of television, many young Americans have trouble reading unless they have background noise.” Another example is students’ increasing tendency to enter and leave classrooms at will, to talk in class, to bring food to class—even, he observes, for couples to kiss during class. He’s had requests for saying “Happy Birthday” to a friend of a student in the class.

Peter Sacks is most bothered by students who expect to be entertained in the classroom. Yet Sacks recognizes the larger societal realities that shape this generation. He writes: “Generation X is arguably

the first fully postmodern cohort of Americans, and they are the product of their culture and of their place in history."¹⁵

This is a time characterized by fragmentation, deconstruction of grand narratives, and superimposed images. What does postmodernism mean for the effective practice of education? According to Sacks, "Educators, whose methods are rooted in the Age of Modernism, need to explicitly acknowledge, if nothing else, that many of the people they are trying to teach are, through and through, the children of a postmodern age."¹⁶

How do we pass on our disciplines to the next generation? What are some types of innovative pedagogy that we might share with one another? What are some strengths and virtues of today's students? What can we learn from Gen Xers?

It has been my experience that the traditional, hierarchical model of teaching—with professor pro-

fessing to student—doesn't work very well with this generation. Experiential exercises, hands-on learning, in-class discussions—these are the types of pedagogical practices that I find best reach our contemporary student.

Learning is a two-way process, and we can indeed learn from our students. This current generation is very diverse (socially, economically, racially, ethnically), and I think we can see some hope for more openness to other cultures among members of this generation.

By necessity, this is a generation that is environmentally conscious. Changes in family structure have meant that Gen Xers form extra-familial relationships. The fact that many of our students are also employed may force us out of our ivory towers and ground us more in reality. We need to face challenges presented by Gen Xers, just as they face challenges presented by us. ■

Endnotes

Acknowledgement: I thank LeAne Rutherford, Harold Hellenbrand, and Milan Kovacovic for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

¹ Sacks, 1996, 16.

² Kottack, 1995.

³ Gozzi, 333.

⁴ Sagen and Ratka, 1997.

⁵ Vanderbilt

⁶ Lipsky & Abrams, 1994.

⁷ Rushkoff, 6.

⁸ Lipsky and Abrams, 1994.

⁹ Rushkoff

¹⁰ Ladd, 1994, 18.

¹¹ Conway, 1997, 304.

¹² Hellenbrand, conversation, 1997.

¹³ Kovacovic, conversation, 1998.

¹⁴ Kottack, 157.

¹⁵ Sacks, 110.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

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