



chapter two

Training the Different Generations

Most adults have a basic learning style reflective of how they were taught in school. We adapt a bit to new technologies, we incorporate a few new approaches, but by and large, we are most comfortable with learning approaches not too different from those used to teach us when we were young. And teaching methods have changed dramatically over the past thirty years. If the last time you were in a public school classroom was well before 1980, or even 1990, check things out. The look, style, and approaches to learning have changed.

Many young people from the emerging generations grew up with learning approaches that used teamwork and collaboration. They learned to use critical thinking skills. They thrived in classrooms with learning pods and subject corners and individualized options. They took part in engaged learning projects. According to the North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL) and the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), engaged learning, problem-based-learning, and self-directed learning are all terms used for “teaching philosophies that encourage the development of autonomous learners who are motivated to become, and responsible for being, in control of their own learning processes” (www.ncrel.org).

What about Baby Boomers and our learning style? Our learning came through lectures and printed text with an occasional opportunity to do something. Our public

school classrooms of the fifties and sixties were sparse, strict, and structured. Teachers taught, reading assignments were given, and things were done sequentially.

Many of us were in college in the sixties, and while some may have been marching and protesting outside of class, in class we all listened up and took good notes. In the seventies, concerned with inner peace, human growth, and reaching our full potential, we sat in circles on beanbags sharing our feelings and letting it all hang out. We looked to gurus and subject-matter experts to tell us the answers—or at least provide insights. We were inundated with self-help books and self-development seminars (remember TA workshops and est seminars?).



THE BOOMER STYLE OF TRAINING

As for those Baby Boomers who became trainers and designers of training, we learned to value personal growth, to share our personal experiences, and therefore we often invite trainees to do the same. Many Boomers approach training as much as a growth experience as a learning experience. We are often concerned for the psychic comfort of our charges.

As an example, take the “set-up” of a training program. If you’ve been doing training like I have for the past twenty years, the first thirty minutes of your program may be carefully devoted to setting a good training climate—welcoming participants, making introductory remarks, presenting an overview of the class and its purpose and goals, covering housekeeping issues, and, of course, introducing yourself and then having the participants meet one another (preferably in a short, clever activity). All of this is done at an energetic, but evenly paced, tempo—accompanied by the appropriate distribution of three-ring binders, of course, and a sprinkling of overhead transparencies or colorful slides.

This approach to setting a good learning climate was established years ago, probably to deal with reluctant participants, many of whom were not happy about attending training. The idea behind the approach may have been to allay participant fears, establish the credentials of the presenter, reassure participants of the value of the course content, and put class members at ease with one another. This style may be very reassuring to older participants, as well as satisfying to our own “encounter group” roots, but to many younger participants, it is frustratingly slow, a little too personal, and seems quite unnecessary.

YOUNGER LEARNER NEEDS NOT BEING MET

Various researchers and observers of the younger generations have itemized differences among the generations that call for new approaches to teaching and training. Mark Prensky, in *Digital Game-Based Learning*, lists numerous ways the Games Generation is different, including their need for speed, connectivity, and activity, and their capacity to randomly access and parallel process a variety of information simultaneously. Prensky writes, “So, in the end, it is all these cognitive differences, resulting from years of ‘new media socialization’ and profoundly affecting and changing the generations’ learning styles and abilities, that cry out for new approaches to learning . . .” (p. 65).

Don Tapscott, in *Growing Up Digital*, writes, “By exploiting the digital media, educators and students can shift to a new, more powerful, and more effective learning paradigm” (Tapscott, 1998, p. 142). The new paradigm he discusses includes such things as a more interactive and nonsequential access to information, more customized learning, and a move toward learning as fun. In her article “The Young and the Rest of Us: Should Trainers Tailor Their Technique Depending on the Age of the Audience?” written after interviewing a variety of trainers about their interactions with younger-generation learners, Jennifer Salopek writes, “Younger workers like to learn at their own pace, need much interactivity, and want to keep updating their skills—constantly” (Salopek, 2000).

When discussing the work ethics of Generation X workers, Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak advise, “Don’t look through the traditional lens. You won’t find it. If you want to tap into it, give them a lot to do and some freedom regarding how the work gets done. You’ll be surprised how much these ‘slackers’ can accomplish and still walk out the door at 5:00 P.M.” (2000, p. 111). This advice also works well for the design of training.



WHAT YOUNGER LEARNERS SAY THEY NEED

When I asked younger learners to describe their ideal educational class or seminar in the surveys I conducted, they made comments like:

- “It would involve a variety of activities and move at a fairly rapid pace.”
- “It would use interactive learning and technology.”
- “Use technology to enhance learning!”

- “Make it fast-paced with lots of chances to apply what we are learning.”
- “The best seminar would have lots of video games, prizes, interaction with all the people at the seminar, and candy.”
- “I have rarely enjoyed a seminar where the instructor simply stands and talks. Bring in examples, video clips, media, something that helps students learn and keeps them from falling asleep or letting their minds wander.”
- “I want a lot of hands-on in a workshop. The more I can work with what I’m learning, the more I’ll take with me and remember afterwards.”
- “The challenge for content developers is to find something that makes people think of the subject matter in a different way than they do. Take something outside of their regular paradigm and say here is another example of this from a movie—or a video clip, something popular. It engages the mind right away.”

Did you find yourself assessing your own programs as you read through these quotes above?



WHAT DO BOOMER TRAINERS NEED TO DO?

If one compares the learning habits and preferences of the younger, emerging generations with the teaching habits and preferences of the older, Boomer teachers and trainers, a few key needs of the younger learners emerge—needs that can be easily met in the design and delivery of almost any training program to make it more appealing to younger learners. Think of these five needs as antidotes to five unfortunate habits of well-meaning Boomer trainers. Let’s take a look at these unfortunate habits and the effects they have on younger learners.

Boomers tend to use a leisurely, even pace when they train. We do not consider this pace to be slow, by no means. And we do vary our pace and are often energetic. Younger learners, however, are accustomed to a much faster, more driving pace. And when they are forced to slow down, they become bored.

Boomer trainers use a predominantly telling style and are still very text-oriented. It’s hard for us to feel comfortable unless we have passed out lots of printed material and gone over it, and perhaps gone over it again, verbally. Younger learners are more accustomed to visual examples, less text, and less telling. Again, too much telling turns them off, and their minds wander. They may even pull out a GameBoy to get them through the lecture. They have a great need for interactivity.

“Cover the content” may be the mantra of many a Boomer trainer. We Boomers feel a great need to cover the content because our success as trainers has often been measured by the ability of our participants to test well on the content, thus proving that learning has occurred. Younger learners are more concerned that the material or content is relevant to them and their situations. If it’s not interesting or relevant to them, if there has been no link made to their lives and their needs, they tune out. What often amazes us older trainers is that younger learners can seem to be spacing out, paying no attention to our telling, perhaps even doing something else, and still do well on the test!

Boomer trainers are unrelentingly guided by the very linear course outline and course design. Again, this very linear approach is very different from the constant multiple options that digital learners are accustomed to. Having little choice and no options, no deviations from the agenda, no unpredictable spurts of unexpected information, the younger learner is again fighting boredom.

And finally, we come to fun. Boomers are not against fun. We love a good time, and we sprinkle a fair amount of fun here and there in our training programs. But when younger learners say they want the learning to be fun, they want all kinds of things: more interaction, more incentives, more involvement, more challenge—both physical and mental.

Put all of these needs and habits together and what do you get? A dynamic that pushes the learner away instead of pulling the learner in.



BOOMER HABITS

YOUNGER LEARNER NEEDS

Use a leisurely, even pace

Pick up the pace

Use telling, text-oriented methods

Increase interaction

Focus on the content

Link to the learner

Take a linear approach

Offer options

Employ a prudent amount of fun

Make learning fun

In the next few chapters, we will take a look at each of these five younger-learner needs and suggest ways of addressing them in the design and delivery of training. Meanwhile, why not see how you do on an assessment of the push and pull between the generations, presented in Exhibit 2.1.



EXHIBIT 2.1. Hey, You're Losing Me, Dude

Is your training losing the emerging generations? Take this short assessment and find out.

Directions: Circle a number for each of the statements below according to how descriptive each statement is of you and your training. Use the following scale.

2 = Always 1 = Sometimes 0 = Never

- | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1. I start my training programs with an immediate, dynamic activity. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 2. In general, I maintain a lively, quick pace when I do training. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 3. I give exact time limits for group activities and stick to them. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 4. I present information in chunks and never reveal information one bit or line at a time. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 5. I do not stand in front of overheads, flip charts, or PowerPoint presentations and read the content out loud. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 6. My programs contain many opportunities for participants to interact. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 7. I keep my lecturing and telling to a real minimum in my programs. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 8. I incorporate "discovery learning" activities into all my training. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 9. My programs contain many involving games and simulations. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 10. Participants get up, move around, and do things often in my classes. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 11. I include examples and illustrations from the popular culture of all the generations present in class. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 12. I make use of a variety of electronic technologies in all my classes. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 13. I use a great many visuals and graphics in my training. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 14. I stimulate the senses of learners in my classes. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 15. I let the learners generate the issues and problems they want to work on in my classes. | 2 | 1 | 0 |

2 = Always 1 = Sometimes 0 = Never

- | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| 16. I give participants choices on how they accomplish class goals. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 17. The games and activities I use include lots of choices for the learner. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 18. I customize the structure and content of class according to the needs of the participants. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 19. Participants in my courses choose from simultaneous learning options. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 20. I am really not very linear in how I approach my training. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 21. I use themes for my programs and in-class games and activities. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 22. I give awards and prizes in my classes. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 23. My classes have lots of fun games and activities in them. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 24. I go out of my way to create a relaxed, pleasant learning environment. | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 25. There is laughter and a good flow of energy in my classes. | 2 | 1 | 0 |

Scoring

Now go through your answers and add up the numbers that you have circled. Write your total score on the line below. Then check the interpretation information below.

Total Score: _____

Interpretation

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| 41 to 50 = Excellent | <i>Way to go. Maybe you can still pick up a tip or two.</i> |
| 31 to 40 = Good | <i>But there is still some room for improvement.</i> |
| 21 to 30 = Not too bad | <i>But you've got work to do.</i> |
| 11 to 20 = Pretty bad | <i>Better start making some changes soon.</i> |
| 0 to 10 = Awful! | <i>You're losing them, Dude. You better get busy right NOW.</i> |



TRAINING A MIX OF GENERATIONS

Although there may be particular workplace programs and special subjects that are targeted to specific age groups and certain work groups or job classifications may have higher representation of one age group or another, most training classes in the workplace will contain participants from all generations. The first step necessary to make the design and delivery of training to a class of mixed-generation participants as effective as possible is awareness.

Just realizing that a variety of techniques and approaches will be needed to fully engage such a class is important. The second step is to have the flexibility and willingness to adapt as you go and as needed. Finally, you will want to have available the necessary repertoire of techniques, games, and activities to utilize.

Emerging-generation techniques can work for everyone. However, it may be necessary to adjust the amount of such techniques and the extent to which you utilize them according to the individual class or program. If you consider the five younger generation's needs—pick up the pace, increase interactions, link to the learner, offer options, and turn up the fun factor—all can be effective with older learners. It is probably more a matter of degree. An extremely fast-paced program, with constant choices and simultaneous offerings, numerous group problem-solving activities, the use of high-tech, fantasy themes, games galore, and lots of incentives may prove a bit overwhelming and distracting to some Boomer learners, but then again, many may just learn to love it!

Ease Up on Boomer Habits with Mixed Generations

It also helps to be aware of your own generational manifestations. Remember the habits of Boomer trainers that younger learners don't like—talk too much, go too slow, step-by-step, and not much fun? Cutting back on some of these tendencies can be a useful first step to take. For example, if you're a Boomer trainer who talks too much, who loves to tell, explain, and lecture away, it would behoove you to find ways to cut way back on this tendency and talk less!

This isn't easy, I know. I'm such a Boomer trainer. There is nothing quite so enchanting as the sound of my own voice floating over an audience of attentive learners. But are they really attentive, or are they merely waiting for me to stop talking so we can get on to *doing* something? I think the voice of one Generation X graduate student running through my mind has helped me with my problem of talking too much. When asked to describe the

worst instructors in the world, she sighed and muttered, "People who are talking to hear themselves talk."

Provide Some Cross-Generational Awareness

There may be times during training programs when it will be appropriate and helpful to include a little cross-generational learning; that is, give the learners information about generational differences and perhaps have an activity that illustrates their generational differences. For example, if you have a very wide range of ages in a particular class and you notice some mild generational conflicts, stop and talk about it. Try an activity like Generational Bingo (Activity 14 in Part Two of this book), which has participants interacting across generations and brings up generational differences in a fun way.

Raising awareness of generational differences, recognizing the perceptions and assumptions that generations have about one another, and discussing related issues could all be beneficial to the effectiveness of the training program and to cross-generational relationships in the workplace. For example, use a variety of examples and illustrations in order to appeal to different generations. Explain that you are doing so and let the participants share information with each other. For example, if you use one example from "Hill Street Blues" and second example from "Dawson's Creek" and you see a few bewildered looks, ask participants to explain the examples to each other.

Recognize and Respect All Generations

It is important that trainers of any age give respect and attention to all generations. Joking and teasing members of one generation or another is not a good thing to do. We must also be careful of generalizing and making assumptions due to age and generation. Many members of the Baby Boomer generation are technically savvy, and I'm sure there are younger learners out there who are not particularly technically competent. And that goes for all the traits assigned to the different generations.

Although it may be a good thing to recognize and discuss generational differences, it is not healthy and appropriate to overdo the labeling of people and generations. People don't like to be labeled. Baby Boomers have grown accustomed to being called such, but many may not like it. And there are plenty of Generation Xers who really don't like that term. So be aware of generational difference, but go easy on the labels!



SUMMARY

Different generations develop different learning styles and habits. The learning styles and habits of the emerging generations have been strongly affected by their use of technology. Younger learners' comfort with all-things-e, especially computers and the Internet, and their early, intense playing of video games, along with other factors, have made them respond better to training given at a quicker pace, containing a high level of interaction, and providing choices and options.

Boomers, on the other hand, tend to train at a more leisurely pace, use more telling, text-oriented methods, and take a very linear approach to things. Boomers need to modify their habits and add more interaction and choice to the design and delivery of training. How much change and modification depends on the generational composition of the class. In classes with a mix of generations, a variety of techniques and approaches will be necessary, along with the flexibility and willingness to adapt design and delivery when needed.

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