

Part One

Outside looking in.

Non-Millennials on Millennials.

Every Generation Has Its Own Classroom

By: Philippe Ernewein

Every generation has its own unique characteristics, values, style, and foundational environment. Perhaps because of the power of technology, access to information, blurring of lines between fantasy and reality, and realized existence of places that are simultaneously virtual and tangible, the Millennial Generation is having a tremendous impact on how learning occurs in our classrooms.

“This is a generation that has had access to cell phones, personal pagers, and computers since they were in diapers. While the Xers [Generation X] were the first to jump on board the personal computer, Millennials can brag about being able to take it for a joyride on the information superhighway. Through the Internet, they have visited virtually every corner of the globe and have been able to choose between hanging out at the local mall or the virtual mall (28).”

From: *When Generations Collide: Who They Are, Why They Clash, How To Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work*

—by Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman

The Millennials have not only arrived, but their impact is already being felt in the arenas of politics, the economy and education. As this book shows, they are an incredibly creative, unique and intelligent group. While leading a discussion about our classroom book, *Into the Wild*, I experienced an example of this that impacted my thinking about education deeply. It helped that I was reading Thomas Friedman’s *The World is Flat* at the time; my mind was primed for finding connections between Friedman’s predominantly economic perspective and examples in my daily reality of the classroom.

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—Philippe Ernewein

While we were reviewing the previous night’s reading, the word *alma mater* came up in our discussion in relation to Chris McCandless’, the book’s main character, and the school he attended, Emory College. I quickly offered a student-friendly definition and continued with the review. At the end of class, while the students were finishing their exit slips, Charlie raised his hand. “Mr. Ernewein, I was curious where the words *alma mater* came from; so after you gave the definition, I looked it up on my phone at dictionary.com.” I automatically gave Charlie my teacher stare because cell phones are not permitted to be used during class. He quickly added, “Actually what I found was

really cool. It comes from Latin and means *nourishing mother*.” And with that comment I felt the classroom move under my feet. Standing in front of the neat rows of desks with students eager to be dismissed, there was a figurative leveling of the classroom floor.

Information no longer rolls down from the teacher’s podium into the open minds of students; some teachers have long known this. For Millennial students specifically, the learning process is collaborative and transactional. Charlie’s actions made that abundantly clear.

This flattening does not mean that information should no longer be presented and shared by the instructional leader of the classroom; the teacher. It does suggest that the way new material is introduced needs to be adapted to our new audience. There is an opportunity for a more collaborative and interactive approach to the presentation of new concepts in the classroom. My students have taught me about the importance of collaborations, critical thinking and allowing for a variety of ways to show what they know through projects, pictures, musical compositions, artwork, videos and websites. The access students have to information (unfiltered, sometimes reliable, sometimes not) has made me prioritize the direct and explicit instruction of critical thinking skills.

Knowledge is everywhere, but wisdom is not. If knowledge is defined as, “Acquaintance with facts, truths, or principles, as from study or investigation,” it is the investigative tools and study strategies that teachers must bring to the classroom. The teachers must also bring those things that cannot be immediately downloaded: wisdom, experience and passion. This book shows the amazing tapestry of insight, thinking, creativity, passion and innovation that the students

bring to our classrooms every day. It is the amazing world according to the Millennial Generation.

Phillippe Ernewein was a 1994 Teach for America Corps Member in Southern Louisiana. He taught at East St. John High School in a self-contained classroom (a double-wide trailer in the middle of sugar cane fields) working with a population of students labeled Behaviorally Disordered and Emotionally Disturbed. In the spring of 1997 he was invited to teach at Denver Academy, an independent school focusing on teaching students with learning differences. For the last eleven years he has taught a variety of high school classes, and served as the head of Core Knowledge HS and English Chair. He is currently the Dean of Faculty Training and Development at Denver Academy. Phillippe also writes a blog at www.rememberit.org.