



Perspective/Opinion

Lessons Learned from “Adapting Medical School Curriculum to Millennial and Generation Z Learners”

By Sandra Pfister, PhD

I am long removed from being considered a member of the Millennial generation. My three children have Millennial birth years (between the early 1980s and 2000), so it makes me ask whether my relationship with them has influenced how I have approached my teaching. And should it?

Based on a recent [article](#) in the *Wisconsin Medical Journal* (WMJ), “Adapting Medical School Curriculum to Millennial and Generation Z Learners,” by Sarina Schrager, MD, MS, WMJ Editor-in-Chief, we should all be adapting our teaching and our curriculum to our Millennial learners. My goal in this perspective is to summarize key recommendations (the 5 Rs) introduced in the WMJ editorial. My words are followed by additional articles from other Learning Environment Pillar members providing their own viewpoints on how key aspects of the 5 Rs contribute to their own work.

When I went to school the “Rs” were **Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic!** Important skills no doubt but the Rs to consider when teaching the current students are instead **Research-Based Methods, Relevance, Rationale, Relaxed and Rapport.** These 5 Rs were created from research by [Dr. Christy Price](#), a psychology professor at Dalton State College. Her [article](#) was entitled “Why Don't my Students Think I am Groovy?: The New ‘R’s for Engaging Millennial Learners.” Her methodology was distinct and informative.

First, Price added formative questions to undergraduate exams taken by students in various courses. She asked, “What did you do to prepare for exam?” “What grade did you expect?” “What would you do differently and how can I help you?” I can’t help but note that each of these questions seem similar to what any preclinical course director would ask our own MCW medical students. Price noted that typically students only looked at selected material (reading *some* of the required reading or waiting too long to study and reviewing course content the night before) and yet most believed that would earn a high grade. We all know how many resources are offered to our medical

students (many outside the information presented in class) and it may seem obvious why our own students may feel overwhelmed and/or struggle.

The 5 Rs described in the *WMJ* editorial were further developed by a thorough approach by Price in which she had students write narratives on their ideal professor and their ideal learning environment.

- The “ideal professor” is energetic and enthusiastic with a positive attitude. “Open-minded and flexible...in assignments, deadlines and course policy.” The number one characteristic Millennials wanted in a professor was approachability.
- The “ideal learning environment” narrative indicated that Price's undergraduate Millennials wanted a learning environment where students knew each other and worked together. The learning environment should be relaxed and “fun.”
- Teaching content needs to include real examples relevant to their world. Variety is important and students only gave negative comments if didactic lecture was only the only style of teaching used.
- In a final assignment, Price had students write their perceptions of professors that understood Millennials vs those that did not. Professors were Millennial-savvy if they understood and effectively used technology and taught with examples relevant to current culture. Professors were relatable if they used humor and also talked about their own life experiences.

Summarizing information from student narratives led to five themes of the 5 Rs.

- **Relevance:** Connect course content to the culture and the Millennial's future.
- **Rationale:** Not true non-conformists but Millennials will follow the course rules and policies if they see the reasoning behind them.
- **Relaxed:** Less formal learning environments allow interaction with professors and other students.
- **Report:** Millennials value relationships. They are much more connected to their parents than previous generations. Millennials want their faculty to be interested in them and want faculty to know they are interested in them.
- **Research-based methods** (of teaching): Traditional lectures are not enough to keep Millennials engaged. They want questions, they want active discussion.

I suppose some of you reading this may not have a positive response. It may be difficult to know how to adapt your own teaching style to what we know our medical students want and need to be successful adult learners. I mean, do I really just need to be more fun?

The other essays in this week's *Transformational Times* were written by others who are part of our MCW learning environment. Each has written a more in-depth analysis into how Millennials (and the 5 Rs) have impacted each of them personally. It is in these

accounts that I believe we will all start to understand the importance of adapting medical school teaching and curriculum to the current generation of students.

For further reading:

Schrager, S (2021), Adapting Medical School Curriculum to Millennial and Generation Z Learners. *Wisconsin Medical Journal*, 120

Price, C. (2009). Why Don't My Students Think I'm Groovy?: The New "R"s for Engaging Millennial Learners. *The Teaching Professor*, 23.

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