

# Motivating Self-Motivation: Reflections on Teaching a New Generation<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**— One of the most difficult tasks facing professors today is increasing student motivation. Although I believe that students are ultimately responsible for their own performance in their classes, I also believe that many of us are not teaching Gen Y, or Net Gen, in a way that speaks to their strengths. While we are busy trying to turn them into students like we were, we are missing out on tapping into a huge potential for our teaching, especially those of us who teach on-line. This paper examines the strengths of Net Gen and offers some strategies for best using those strengths.

**Keywords**—motivation, pedagogy, students.

## I. INTRODUCTION

ONE of the most difficult tasks for teachers of today is increasing student motivation. I say teachers of today because when I was a college student, it was up to me. My professors put the information out there for me, and if I wanted to take advantage of it, that was my responsibility. There were occasional handouts, but other than that, there were lectures. Of course, this was in the stone ages of 35 years ago—when teachers were still distant authority figures, before personal computers, before the Internet. These days, almost all of us use newer technology while teaching, and the static lectures we sat through in undergraduate years just do not work. The longer I teach, the more I am coming to realize that today's students are radically different from the Gen X student I was and the Baby Boomers before me. I would like to focus on the new generation of students we have and their needs and abilities, as well as discuss methods for reaching these students. Most entail using technology we have used in the past or perhaps something we have not used yet but have easily available. I will also discuss how we can make relatively simple changes to our materials and our teaching in order to inspire more active learning on the part of the students.

To tell the truth, I often ask myself, do the students even need me anymore? It seems I'm not the only one asking. Michael A. Winkleman asked the same question in his article "Myths and Realities for Today's College Professors; or, *Et in Arcadia Ego*":

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Are they [teachers] still absolutely required in the twenty-first-century classroom? Regrettably, at present the answer remains yes. Penny-pinching administrators and grade-grubbing students presumably consider the professor a quaint relic or maybe a necessary evil, but though great strides in distance learning, outsourcing, and interactive computer games promise to render teachers "redundant" (i.e., expendable) before too long, today they still play a considerable role on campus. Yet that role, perforce, is changing. No longer are they prophets of wisdom, preservers of a great tradition (let alone canon). No longer do they advance an Arnoldian project, learning and propagating the best that is known and thought in the world. (Winkelman 174-75)

Winkelman's paper is more of a commentary on American academia today aimed at recent PhDs who are looking for a job. This is slightly different from my questioning if the students still need me. I'm wondering if technology is phasing me out of the classroom.

Like many of my fellow professors, there are times when I am not feeling overly rosy about the entire educational process. I become frustrated with myself and with my students. It seems, at times, as if I were drill sergeant—constantly nagging, cajoling and pushing my students to perform, perform, perform. Perhaps this is because I often teach first years, and I am trying to instill good habits in them before they are let loose into the upper level classes. But I often wonder, "what can I do differently to allow my students to motivate themselves." And more important, "why aren't my students *self*-motivated when they arrive at college?"

Part of the problem, of course, is that these students are part of the "hothouse flowers" generation who have been reared by their "helicopter parents." I use the slightly pejorative terms for the phenomena because in our line, we usually deal with the drawbacks. We are often teaching students who have been brought up in a rarified atmosphere of privilege, and I do not just mean wealth. I mean being spoiled and pampered by parents who do not want their children to face the indignity of a failure, no matter how mild. So these "helicopter parents" hover over their children, often stepping in when a child neglects some aspect of school work. In America, it is sadly not uncommon for the parents to finish school projects long after the children's interests have waned and they have moved on to more interesting, to them, tasks.

One of the side effects of this method of parenting is a child's need for frequent and positive feedback. In a very enlightening study "Factors Influencing College Students'

Motivation To Learn From Students' Perspective," carried out at Al-Ain University by Ibtesam Halawah, she shows the importance of teacher personality and teaching style on student motivation. Giving early and positive feedback is important to them, as is the perception that the teacher cares about them. In the discussion of the study, Halawah offers some important insights and advice:

The sincerity of the teacher in his relations with the students individually is found to be the prerequisite for his classroom performance and better self expression. The teacher cares not only for the feelings, efforts and performances of his students but also for their success. All factors affect a given student's motivation to work and to learn should be considered to keep their motivation to learn. It is important to remember that there is a limit to motivate students. But it is also important not to stop trying because you may find that, just as you become tired and frustrated, whatever pressures have been pulling the student down will eventually ease, and when this happens, they will appreciate the efforts you have made.

Of course, it is difficult for teachers to change their personality, but the older model of the uncaring disciplinarian does not resonate well with our younger students. But as this is the model many of us faced in university, we sometimes fall back on these less than useful strategies.

While I still believe that students are ultimately responsible for their own performance in their classes, I also believe that many of us are not teaching Gen Y, or Net Gen, in a way that speaks to their strengths. While we are busy trying to turn them into students like we were, we are missing out on tapping into a huge potential for our teaching. It's time for something new. And it is not fully the students who need to change; it is also we professors who need to change what we are doing. As Allen Collins and Richard Halverston note in their 2009 book, *Rethinking Education in the Age of Technology: The Digital Revolution and Schooling in America*, "Simply inserting technology into classrooms and schools without considering how the contexts for learning need to change will likely fail" (140). So while this paper is a start in the right direction, there still needs to be more work done in order reexamining these contexts.

One of the first pushes toward a new direction for me was the work of Amanda Grant, a sophomore communications media student at Fitchburg State University. Her paper, "Generation What?" was distributed to all of the faculty at Fitchburg State, not for its great scholarly merit but for its insights into her generation. By going back to her sources, I found a wealth of information that has changed the way I look at things. Her paper led me to Larry D. Rosen, a professor at California State University, Dominguez Hills, who has been studying this generation. In an interview about his recent book, *Me, MySpace and I: Parenting the Net Generation*, he offers some useful information:

This is a generation of kids, teens and young adults who have been raised from the very beginning immersed in technology. Most of them know no other world, no world that doesn't include the Internet. They are defined by their reliance on technology, their use of technology, and particularly their

propensity for multitasking technologically; they are also defined by the fact that they use a variety of media to communicate with the world, with their friends and even in the business world. Those kinds of communication technologies are different than the ones that previous generations are used to. They don't use technology, it simply *is*.

It's the main focus of their life. See, that's the difference. A baby boomer and even a Gen X would say, "Well, I use the Internet" or "I use my cell phone a lot" or "I text message" and so on. Gen X learned how to use technology, whereas the Net Gen kids were raised steeped in technology and they don't use it, it just simply *is*. (Olsson)

Of course, this is nothing new to us. We all know this. But do we apply it when we teach? Sometimes I don't. Not only are these students technologically advanced, as Rosen notes, they use the technology differently than most of us. According to the Pew Research Center, these students are expert multi-taskers. Pew researchers found that "other offline activities commonly conducted while online include; watching television shows or movies (33.8%), listening to the radio (21.4 %), watching music videos on television (21.2 %), sending text messages by cell phone (20.1 %), talking on a cell phone (19.0 %), talking on a land line phone (16.3%), and watching sports on television (11.8 %)." (Pew Research)

Today's students are used to constant stimulation, but they digest their information in snippets instead of chunks. While our generations were used to working in quiet, concentrating on one thing at a time, today's generation absorbs knowledge differently. While I often suffer from knowledge overload, they don't. "The Millennial generation faces a new media world and finds the varied media landscape to be empowering, and not confusing; they actively embrace its possibilities." (Harris Interactive) According to Jane Weaver, recent studies show that the Internet is the primary media choice for young people.

On a typical day, the average young person can be confronted with at least 200 cable channels, more than 5,000 consumer magazines, thousands of radio stations and millions of Web sites. But young people don't feel overwhelmed by the abundance of media choices available to them, the study, which polled more than 2,500 teens, found. (Weaver)

The director of the Pew Institute, Lee Rainie, adds "The media permeates all they do except when they're sleeping. Theirs is a multimedia life." (Weaver) For a clearer idea of what students are doing when online, see the chart below:

TABLE I  
STUDENT ONLINE ACTIVITY  
When you are online, what else do you typically do?

Listen to CDs/Mp3s	68%
Eat	67%
Watch TV	50%
Talk on the Telephone	45%
Listen to the radio	45%
Do homework	45%
Read	21%
Nothing	5%

Source: (Harris Interactive)

Of course, this research was done with American students, but I don't think students in other industrialized countries are far behind.

So what does this mean in terms of teaching? I have learned that static presentations are not going to work well. It might be frightening to those of us who are pre-Gen Y, but we're facing students with attention spans of less than a minute these days. This is not to say that students can't concentrate for long periods when they want to. Of course they can and do, but the quality of their concentration is different, and if something "bores" them, they very quickly tune out. We all realize that television commercials are becoming shorter and shorter. Thanks to remote controls and hundreds of TV stations, people endlessly surf through channels rather than sit through a "boring" commercial. Another trend is that more and more young people are watching their television straight off network websites, often while multitasking, for instance, accessing other websites and chatting on an IM program while watching something online. When we couple these two things together, we realize that we start to "lose" our students' attention very quickly. A Dutch television station, RTL Nederlands, has reported that 18% of internet viewers turn off a program before it's even started when it has a 10 second pre-roll advertisement before an online presentation. For a 30 second spot, that number jumps to 33% (RTL Nederlands). Put another way, one third of the audience is ready for something new after 30 seconds, which is a very scary thought for some of us trying to teach.

Advertisers have accepted this change in the way people absorb information, and in a newsletter, one enterprising company puts the short attention span into perspective:

*Should you shed tears [over this new shorter attention span]? Picket your school system? Turn back the clock?* Heck, no. You should accept that it's real, recognize that communications will have to change to address the "short attention spaniels," and that your competitors may not be adapting to this new reality as quickly as you. That, my friend, is not a sociological generalization: *it's a brand strategy.*

You need to examine, or re-examine, every bit of text you use to communicate with your audiences. (Killian & Company)

Killian & Company, an advertising firm, presents the situation in a breezy and upbeat manner, but they have accepted the reality of society today and adapted to it. While we are not strictly in the selling business, education today has become more and more a consumer-driven commodity, and the students are the consumers. Darwin tells us things adapt or die. Offering online classes has been one way colleges and universities have adapted to our new society, but we need to go further. I see Gen Y as almost an evolutionary jump in the human species. Because of these changes, students process information in ways we do not, or even cannot, and we are the ones who have to make adaptations.

I must admit that most of the adaptations in my teaching are found only in my online teaching: I post a series of "mini-lectures," often created with Windows Movie Maker. With it, I can incorporate video clips or music into the lecture and put slides and photos over my voice recording. The students can

hear my voice, but also have visual stimulation. While I've learned that students like to "see" who is talking to them, they are quickly bored by the same image minute after minute. It's taken me an investment of time to learn the software, and yes, making lectures with Movie Maker is more time consuming than writing a regular lecture with an accompanying PowerPoint presentation, but for those of us who teach online, materials preparation is always going to take longer than materials preparation for a traditional classroom setting; that's just part of the process for teaching online. Students then look at a few different clips on several related topics than one long clip that moves from point to point like a traditional lecture. Students prefer it because they can take ten minutes to focus on one part of a unit's work, switch to something else, and then come back to my materials.

Of course, this is not very helpful in a classroom situation, which is where most of us still do the majority of our teaching. But almost all of us do teach in mediated classroom with access to all the Web 2.0 tools that online teachers use. I teach two subjects: writing and literature. For writing, there are many tools I can use, but most are supplements used out of the classroom. As Chung-Kai Huang and Chun-Yu Lin explain in their study on language learning, "New resources such as blogs, wikis, voice applications, social networking sites, and virtual communities have allowed people with common interests to meet, share ideas, and collaborate in innovative ways (Collis & Moonen, 2008; Greenhow, Robelia & Hughes, 2009). Web 2.0 is creating a participatory medium and culture for user-contributed learning." The Blackboard platform makes using blogs, wikis and discussion boards quite easy for professors and students as well, and I've found in both writing and literature courses that students who are shy or quiet in class often have quite a lot to say when required to post online. Working together online removes some of the barriers of time and availability that some students face and often less web-savvy students are willing to learn how to use new technology, recognizing that Web 2.0 technology is almost definitely part of their future professional lives.

PowerPoint is enormously popular, of course, and I've been trying to stretch myself to use it to its full capacity, as well.<sup>2</sup> By this I mean that I try to keep up with the technology. Sometimes my intentions are better than my final presentation, but I am trying to incorporate new features into my slide shows. PowerPoint can now accommodate voice recordings, video clips and music in order to create a presentation that has more to it than reading static text and viewing still photos or drawings. We can add animations to the slide show so that transitions are lively and then add a sound to the transition as well if we think a sound will catch student attention. Again, I've learned the key is keeping things short. I sometimes have presentations as short as seven to eight slides on a single

<sup>2</sup> For better or worse, Microsoft's Office Suite, of which PowerPoint is a component, has become the industry standard. I have used OpenOffice's open shareware program Impress, which is very similar to PowerPoint. Both have very similar features, but in this paper I will be referring to the Microsoft product.

specific topic. Students can digest the course information in mini-bites instead of a longer twenty-plus slide presentation.

This breaking the materials up into smaller parcels serves another purpose, as well. “The rise of ‘active’ media provides a choice – a fresh outlet for a young person’s drive to control the environment around them. Teens and young adults are searching for independence and control, and the Internet gives it to them like no other media can” (Harris Interactive). The desire for control is nothing new for young people and giving students a sense of control over how they structure their weekly learning encourages them to do their work in a timely manner, if only to show that they are able to take control themselves.

While it’s very natural for our students to turn to the internet for all their information needs, sometimes we as professors forget its riches as we prepare lessons. Many sites students use regularly are there to support us. YouTube is a veritable treasure trove of materials. I have found countless documentaries, usually produced by network television, so I can send students to a professional quality resource I could not possibly produce with my budget (zero dollars), software and skills. I have used these documentaries in courses as diverse as “Expository Writing,” (most of the *Grammar Rock* series as well as brief discussions of timely topics) “British Literature I” (materials on King Arthur, Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton), “Classics of World Literature” (a documentary on classic Greek theater as well as scenes from plays) and “The Bible as Literature” (many resources on the Holy Lands, biblical authorship and biblical poetry). Documentaries aren’t the only resource one can find. Recent primary materials I have gleaned from YouTube include a newsreel of Martin Luther King, Jr delivering his entire “I Have a Dream” speech, another of President John F. Kennedy’s inaugural speech, and films of Helen Keller speaking to an audience and then in her own sitting room.

As a literature teacher, perhaps my choices are richer as there are also countless videos of poets reading their work—even WB Yeats and Edna St. Vincent Millay can be heard reading their own poetry—as well as many other sources. Because these resources are posted on YouTube, I don’t have to worry about copyrights or permissions. As long as I check to see that they are still in place before I assign them there are few problems. Sometimes the original poster will have violated a copyright, but YouTube is getting much better at removing them quickly. There is also a subtle “cool factor” built into using YouTube—many students voluntarily visit the site, but being sent by a teacher is still a rare event. The novelty has yet to wear off. I find that students react very positively to using this site, and it’s often the first resource they use in the unit for which it is scheduled.

iTunes, a place students are also quite familiar with, is a great resource, which also comes with a bit of the “cool factor”. Along with the music, there’s a section called “iTunesU,” which contains free podcasts on a wide range of topics. Some are radio programs that have been shared by the original producer—the BBC is very good about this—as well as thousands of hours of open courses from top universities. Students can also find audio books of most classics and some

more modern works. Sometimes I will use a short podcast in class, but most times, I assign a podcast as part of a discussion board or blog activity.

The revelations about NetGen were not total revelations to me. But seeing the students as a new breed has certainly lessened the stress I feel when teaching online. By perceiving the students’ technological differences as strengths they have instead of weaknesses in their attention span, I am approaching my students in a more positive light. They are no longer “poor” students who need to “learn how to learn properly”; instead they are savvy students from whom much can be demanded. By reversing my view and seeing my students as having unique strengths, I am empowering them to take responsibility for their own learning as well as taking the responsibility to keep themselves motivated during the term. Yes, my role is changing, but instead of seeing myself as being phased out, I prefer to see my role as evolving. I am still the mentor in the classroom, the “elder,” if you will, but I no longer have to be the drill sergeant. And for that, I am very grateful for the changes Gen Y are bringing to the class.

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