ENGAGING MILLENNIALS

How Student Response Solutions Enhance Learning for Today’s College Students
Educating students is at the heart of any college or university mission. Faculty and administrators alike work tirelessly to ensure that students leave with not only a degree, but also as well-rounded individuals with areas of profound expertise, a facility for learning and expanded horizons.

However, before students can enjoy the life-changing benefits offered by a higher education, faculty first have to find a way to engage them in the lessons they are teaching.

Enter the millennials, a group with methods of learning and interacting that are often foreign to instructors. How can faculty – sometimes one or two generations removed – reach these tech-savvy, smartphone-obsessed, social media experts?

Read on to learn more about the characteristics of the millennial generation and to find out how Student Response Solutions (SRS) provide a key to fueling their engagement and unlocking millennial learning potential in the classroom.

**Student Response Solutions (SRS)**

SRS allow instructors to ask interactive questions, track student progress and receive instant feedback. In simple terms, instructors using response technology can pose a question to the entire class that the students then answer by using either a specially designed mobile app or a wireless “clicker” device. These questions often integrate polling into a variety of applications whether online or through a desktop application, but some systems additionally allow users to incorporate polling questions directly within a PowerPoint presentation.

Once students respond to a question, the results of the entire group are displayed on a graph for everyone to see. SRS can also have the capacity to display and store response data instantaneously so that instructors are able to remediate instruction in real-time or to track individual students over time. The technology can generate comprehensive reports on a variety of topics including attendance and student performance.
The Millennial Generation

The Pew Research Center (2014) defines millennials as those who were born between 1981 and 1996, although it makes clear that a definitive end point has not yet been established. This is reflected in the fact that the exact years that encompass this generation tend to vary by source.

Millennials differ from older generations on a wide variety of points. About 50 percent of millennials identify as politically independent, more than any other group, while voting patterns indicate a distinct liberal leaning and preference for Democratic candidates. They are also the most racially diverse generation, and the group least likely to claim a religious affiliation (Pew, 2014).

In addition, this generation, although the best-educated, faces the daunting economic challenges of higher student debt, poverty and unemployment. They nevertheless remain optimistic about their futures (Pew, 2014).

But beyond the broad demographic data, what characteristics define millennial learners? Several key factors stand out across the literature regarding what they consider essential to a successful learning environment.

First, millennials have a desire for immediate and continual feedback. This stems partly from the fact that their more popular modes of communication, like texting and social media, consistently facilitate real-time interaction (Gallup, 2016). Another factor is that they grew up with the internet, and its vast array of information, always instantly at their fingertips (Monaco & Martin, 2007).

Collaboration is also valued by today's students, and comprises a crucial facet of their ideal learning environment (Price, 2009). As a result, they often prefer team-based education, with the instructor acting to facilitate learning, rather than a more teacher-centric model (Benfer & Shanahan, 2013).
The modern college student likewise demands active engagement in the classroom. As with their penchant for collaboration, this has its roots in their need for more learner-centric models that do not rely only on traditional lectures (Toohey, Wray, Wiechmann, Lin, & Boysen-Osborn, 2016).

Finally, millennials are defined by their proficiency with technology. These “digital natives” grew up with innovations like the internet, smartphones and social media as regular parts of everyday life. As a result, they want and expect technology to be integrated into their lessons (Price, 2009).

As with the demographic measures, one thing is clear: the ways millennials learn and their expectations in the classroom are markedly different from past generations of college students.

**Meeting the Needs of Today's Learners with SRS**

With the millennial profile firmly in mind, let’s break down some of these key characteristics with an eye toward illustrating how SRS deftly aligns with them, providing faculty with the technological tools to both engage these students and improve their learning experiences.

**Feedback**

SRS by design provides both students and instructors with the immediate feedback that millennials crave. Asking questions with response technology allows students to provide input, assess their understanding and get a sense of the opinions and knowledge level of their peers. It also enables instructors to customize their lessons and interact with students based on actual learner needs, instead of delivering a one-size-fits-all lesson.
Collaborative Learning

As Monaco and Martin (2007) observe, “This generation is a collaborative and social generation that has a focus on understanding and building their knowledge through various forms of medium to discover the answers.”

Response technology can facilitate collaboration by allowing instructors to use interactive questions as a jumping off point for smaller group discussions. This type of use can build a foundation that allows instructors to implement active learning pedagogies, including peer instruction and the flipped classroom model, that are designed to create a learner-centric, collaborative class experience.

Engagement

According to Price (2009), “Millennials have grown up in an era in which they were constantly engaged. When they are not interested, their attention quickly shifts elsewhere...Millennials prefer a variety of active learning methods, as opposed to a more traditional lecture-only format.”

In other words, they do not want to sit quietly and listen to lectures, but instead want to be an engaged part of interactions that shape the learning process. Fortunately, studies support the efficacy of active learning, including the use of response systems, in improving class outcomes with significantly higher grades and lower failure rates compared to classes centered on traditional, lecture-based teaching methods (Freeman et al., 2013).

The interactive nature of response technology likewise has been shown to increase reported learner engagement and participation levels (Kaleta& Joosten, 2007).
Perhaps even more strikingly, 91 percent of learners in one study agreed that they had experienced deeper learning as a consequence of the discussions that followed interactive response questions, while 90 percent agreed that the technology facilitated critical thinking (Williams, 2003).

**Technology**

Sometimes described as the “most wired generation,” millennials use the internet for everything from news to social interaction at rates far higher than their older counterparts (Gallup, 2016). This has a big impact on their desires regarding the use of technology in class. As Monaco and Martin (2007) state, “They have been technologically stimulated throughout their childhood and demand this connectivity as they matriculate through college.”

SRS not only addresses this generation’s tech-friendly preferences, but also provides instructors with an easy-to-use technology that they can incorporate into lessons regardless of their individual area of expertise or pedagogical approach to teaching. Some response solutions even integrate with learning management systems, like Blackboard or Moodle, making the adoption and use of the technology for both teachers and students even more seamless.

**Mobile**

Beyond just technology, millennials also have an affinity for their smartphones. In fact, 85 percent of them access the internet on their phones instead of a desktop or laptop computer (Gallup, 2016). About 22 percent even think it is OK to use their cell phone during a class or lecture (Pew, 2014).
Some response solutions allow professors to actually use this enthusiasm for their phones in a way that turns an annoyance into an advantage. In addition to traditional hardware devices, these systems also provide an option for students to instead use a mobile app that functions in the same way. This gives students the opportunity to fully engage in class while using a device that is both familiar and ubiquitous.

**Conclusion**

Teaching, engaging and understanding the millennial generation can present challenges for instructors whose experiences and views on education are far removed from those of their students. However, SRS is one tool that can bridge that gap and help faculty fulfill their mission of imparting knowledge, unlocking potential and ensuring that students graduate with a degree that will serve as a lifelong foundation for success.
References


