
Talkin' 'bout my generation: a brief introduction to generational theory

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Final Year students. (Photo courtesy of University of Plymouth)

If you have been watching television or reading newspapers recently, you may have noticed that the topic of 'generations', especially in terms of students and their parents, has been finding its way into the headlines. Interviews and articles have covered the issue of generations in terms of education, job recruitment and even, most recently, the current state of the economy. Paul Redmond, Head of Careers at the University of Liverpool, has been providing expertise for the media (BBC Education News, viewed 2008; Redmond, 2008a) on 'Generational Theory' and its potential ramifications for Higher Education, and in turn, discussed this theory during his thought-provoking and timely keynote session on day two of our GEES residential conference, July 2008, themed around employability, employer engagement and enterprise (Redmond, 2008b).

Paul introduced Generational Theory through discussion of past, present and future generations and how they interact with their peers, their parents and employers. He discussed the lessons that could be learned by both Higher Education and employers

about recruitment and retention of current and future generations. However, he also acknowledged that Generational Theory is contested knowledge, suffering from an over-use of generational labels and its current 'in-vogue' adoption by the media. Paul's keynote encouraged me to investigate Generational Theory a little further, and what follows is a summary of my understanding (as a relative newcomer) of the theory and a few thoughts on where it may lead us in terms of working with students.

The basic ideas of successive generations and the tensions between those generations is nothing new: Homer recognized these issues in the Iliad. Generational Theory itself has been developed by social scientists as one mechanism that can help explain cultural change: simplistic descriptions state that this theory describes the 'era' that an individual is born into and how it affects the development of their world view. Many magazine and internet sources state that each 'generation' tends to be 20 years in length and bounded by significant events, but the academic literature, as one might expect,

builds a more uncertain and complicated picture. Karl Mannheim (1952) was the first modern academic to investigate the development of generational values, specifying that a 'generation' is not simply a cohort clustered by a bounded year of birth, but is a group of contemporaries who share a history and a set of experiences that have marked their formative life. However, this latter requirement does not necessarily lead to the recognition of an actual generation: for that to occur, Mannheim suggests that there needs to be an active recognition of these experiences by the potential generation. Being born in the right place, and experiencing certain events, does not necessarily equal a 'new generation'.

There are also differences between apparently equivalent generations from both a European (Diepstraten, 1999) and Western context: that is, the discussion of generations needs to acknowledge geographical differences. For example, popular Generational Theory in the U.S. sees dramatic changes following on from 9-11. 'The Homeland Generation' is now a term used by both recruitment firms and religious organisations in the US, but is not used in other countries. North American researchers Strauss and Howe (1991) took the work of Mannheim further by not only looking at how events in history can mold a generation, but also by investigating the concept that these generations themselves might mold history. The structure developed by these authors consists of a cycle of 'secular crisis' and 'spiritual awakening',

with four recurring generational types (idealistic, reactive, civic and adaptive) travelling through their life cycles (from 'youth' to 'elder') over that period of time.

In Strauss and Howe's take on Generational Theory, the 'crisis' and 'awakening' events in history affect the generations living through them: those generations will then go on to shape the next cycle of 'crisis' and 'awakening' events. This extension of Generational Theory is controversial, with both sociologists and historians.

So, according to current literature, who are the current generations active in UK Higher Education and how, in brief, can Generational Theory help in understanding and developing the student experience?

Paul Redmond's GEES keynote acknowledged the generational tags which are currently used in popular UK culture: the Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y and the Millennials. The keynote audience itself consisted of 'Boomers, Generation X and Y: the Millennials are either about to start school or have not yet been born. Table 1 summarizes some of the peer characteristics of the three main generations active in UK HE today (Redmond 2008b; Strauss and Howe, 1991).

Much of what has been discussed so far may seem like common-sense: there is and always will be

Boomers 1943-1960. Lecturers & parents of students. Some students.	Generation X 1961-1981. Lecturers & parents of students. Some students.	Generation Y 1982-2001. Students.
Largest generation in history	Blurring of traditional boundaries	Connected 24/7: a knowledge economy
35% of the current workforce	End of Cold-War certainties	Self-confident, independent and optimistic
Defined by post-war optimism	Lack of clarity in the world around them	Bored by routine
Ethos: hard work, loyalty, rewards, 'making things'	Loyal to profession, not employer	Entrepreneurial and goal-orientated
Family- orientated	Grew up during a time of strong political leadership	Want mentors, not bosses
Currently comprise 87% of all CEOs and senior management	Used to a 'service economy'	Career means a 'cause', not money
"Anything can happen when you turn up for work" (Woody Allen)	Largest group now in the workforce	Want equality, transparency and fairness
	Confident, independent	Work-life balance more than just a buzz word
	Worried about work-life balance	Digital natives
	Digital immigrants	

Table 1: A summary of the peer characteristics of current generational 'players' in UK HE

generational shift. So why is it suddenly so important and taking up so much media time? Paul Redmond's keynote contextualized Generational Theory with respect to employers and recruiters and how they are currently viewing Generation Y. Some recruiters argue that generation Y is proving to be cynical about large organizations, leading to a 'disconnect' between this generation and mainstream employers. As a result, the issue of generational succession and how this might be dealt with is at the forefront of recruiters' and employers' thoughts: this affects the perceived employability of students and so has an effect on what students want from their time in HE. Therefore, whatever we, as the GEES HE community, may think about Generational Theory, employers and recruiters are paying attention to it.

In conclusion, it could be recognized that Generational Theory, taking in to account its contested nature, has a role both in developing relationships between staff and students in HE and in preparing students for the world of work. There are, however, a number of caveats that I think are worth highlighting here and may be worthy of further discussion at another time:

- A student cohort may well consist of a number of generations. It will certainly consist of students from different cultural and geographical backgrounds who may not have the same generational characteristics as their UK peers.
- Although it can often be comforting to feel part of a generational group, it can also be constraining: the use of generational tags can leave individuals feeling labeled and boxed in.
- Recognition of generational differences can be positive, as long as individual generations do not 'blame' the incoming or outgoing generations for these differences.
- Recognition of such differences can also go in both temporal directions: if Generation Y can gain an understanding of previous generations, it can only help them in the world of work.

I would like to encourage readers to listen to Paul's keynote presentation if they have not already done so. It is available as audio and as a set of Powerpoint slides from the GEES SC website (www.gees.ac.uk) (Redmond, 2008b). I would also welcome your thoughts on this article, if you think it worth further consideration. Please feel free to email me with your thoughts and how, if appropriate, the GEES SC might take this topic further in relation to not only employability and employer engagement, but learning, teaching and assessment as a whole.



A student cohort may well consist of a number of generations
(Photos courtesy of University of Plymouth)



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