

# **INFLUENCE OF GENERATIONS' TRAITS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING IN AN OPEN DISTANT LEARNING (ODL) ENVIRONMENT.**

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## **Abstract**

Influence of different generations' traits on teaching and learning has been of great interest to researchers in education systems in recent times. Three different generations are analysed by the authors, which are baby boomers, generation X and generation Y. Baby boomers are those people born between 1946 and 1964, generation X were born between 1965 and 1981, and generation Y were born from 1982 to the present. The gap between these generations is not limited to age and technology but also reflect the effects of a changing society on a generation. This present paper reviews the effect of different generations' characteristics on teaching and learning. The focus is on the teaching and learning in an open distant learning (ODL) environment. The complexity of teaching and learning in an ODL environment is analysed in line with the different generations' traits. A design model is proposed for effective mixed teaching and learning in an ODL environment that fits the different generations.

**Keywords:** Generations, Learning, ODL, Teaching, Traits

## **1.0 Introduction**

The term "generation" signifies the grouping of individuals, most of whom are within a similar age group, born in the same time of history and culture, having similar ideas, problems and attitudes (Weingarten, 2009; dictionary.Com, 2012). Due to the different ideologies and technological evolution over time, a generation at a certain period tends to be exposed to approximately similar generic life experiences depending on cultural background. Society is changing every day with a changing effect on generations.

Researchers have identified different generations including: Veterans, baby boomers, generation X and generation Y (Kipnis and Childs, 2004; Joan, 2009; Weingarten, 2009). Veterans were born between 1922 and 1945, baby boomers are those people born between 1946 and 1964, generation X were born between 1965 and 1981, and generation Y were born from 1982 to the present. The uniqueness of each generation also affects their response to teaching and learning.

Distant learning (DL) has been defined in many ways by different researchers (Greenberg 1998; Teaster and Blieszner 1999; Heydenrych and Prinsloo 2010) but the authors define distant learning as a teaching and learning scenario in which the teacher and student are physically separated in space and possibly time. ODL is a distant learning, which gives open access to different kinds of learners with no restriction on age, social status, marital status and number. Learning through a distant has both benefits and challenges. The benefits of distance learning include learning from wherever you are, at whatever time you want and the ability to work and study at the same time. However, Valentine, 2002 identified some challenges, which include the quality of instruction, misuse of technology, the attitudes of instructors, students, and administrators. These challenges can be tackled if all stakeholders understand the influence of generational traits on teaching and learning at a distance.

Production and marketing companies have long recognised the importance of generational differences in the design of their products. Educators are also considering the generational gap in the design of their teaching and learning strategies including use of technology especially for the younger generations (Brown, 1997; Cant, 2010). While it is challenging to teach the younger generations it becomes more challenging to teach a mixture of the different generations, which is a usual case in an ODL. Hence, it is important to understand the dynamics of teaching and learning in an ODL environment where there are mixed generations. To reach out to students effectively, the uniqueness of different generations involved in learning has to be considered.

This paper will highlight the characteristics of different generations. Their response to teaching and learning will be looked into and a mixed model for teaching and learning will be designed to cater for all the generations involved. Three generations will be analysed, which are baby boomers, generation X and generation Y. The Veterans are exempted from this analysis because most people in this generation are already retired, great grandparents or grandparents and rarely study. The mixed model design suggested by the authors is based on the authors' experiences at the University of South Africa, all of which are academic engineering lecturers.

## **2.0 Characteristics of different generations**

In this section, the characteristics of each generation will be analysed based on social, personal and teaching and learning. Characteristics comparison will be done between baby boomers, generation X and generation Y. The learning ability of different generations is seriously impacted by their social and personal characteristics. Tables

1.0 and 2.0 below summarise the generational social and personal characteristics respectively. The teaching and learning traits of each generation based on their social and personal characteristics are highlighted in Table 3.0.

**Table 1.0: Social characteristics of different generations**

<b>BABY BOOMERS</b>	<b>GENERATION X</b>	<b>GENERATION Y</b>
Grew up with both parents, while the mother is most likely full time wife.	Grew up with both parents working/furthering their education	Grew up with both parent working/furthering their education
Grew up with other kids, this gives little attention to personal attachment with parent.	Period with increased divorce rates and HIV/AIDS. Grew up with single parent	Period with increased divorce rates and HIV/AIDS. Grew up with single parent/grandparents.
Introduction of women's Rights Movement	More women in the work place.	More women in executive positions and politics.
Chalk board and paper based generation.	Introduction of computers	The Age of Technology and Online social networking. Microwave age.

**Sources:** Brown, 1997; Weingarten, 2009

**Table 2.0: Personal characteristics of different generations**

<b>BABY BOOMERS</b>	<b>GENERATION X</b>	<b>GENERATION Y</b>
They enjoy working in a group.	As much as they value team work, they are independent problem solvers.	As much as they value team work, they are independent problem solvers.
They are not bothered about recognition by others but more concerned about personal gratification	They want personal recognition.	They want personal recognition.
They are not comfortable with conflict	They question authority	They are confident, not afraid to speak for change.
Workaholic generation, willing to put all effort to achieve career goals for personal gratification.	They want flexible hours and an informal work environment.	They want flexible hours, don't want to be controlled and want to do things at their own pace.
They are not comfortable with technological advances.	They are motivated by the possibility of the latest technological advances.	Competent with sophisticated technology. Bored with paper works.
They are not tolerant of negative feedback.	They are not keen on receiving feedback.	They require constant feedback.
They are calm and	They are impatient	They are impatient, want

satisfied.		instant gratification.
They prefer focusing on one goal at a time.	They are multi-tasking, want to achieve different goals at the same time.	They are multi-tasking, want to achieve different goals at the same time.
They don't mix work with pleasure. They are not comfortable with social networks.	They want to be in a social environment physically and technologically.	They want to be in a social environment physically and technologically all the time.
They concentrate on a single career and excel in it.	They acquire variety of skills and experiences to build a transferable career.	They build several parallel careers, have several jobs simultaneously

**Sources:** Kipnis and Childs, 2004; Monaco and Martin, 2007; Weingarten, 2009  
<http://www.un.org/staffdevelopment/pdf/Designing%20Recruitment,%20Selection%20&%20Talent%20Management%20Model%20tailored%20to%20meet%20UNJSPF's%20Business%20Development%20Needs.pdf> ACCESSED 15-06-12

**Table 3.0: Teaching and learning traits of different generations**

<b>BABY BOOMERS</b>	<b>GENERATION X</b>	<b>GENERATION Y</b>
They enjoy working in a group.	As much as they value team work, they are independent problem solvers.	As much as they value team work, they are independent problem solvers.
They require feedback.	They require feedback.	Expect immediate and continuous feedback on progress.
This generation prefers using library and printed documents instead of web and phone.	Requires integration of technology and media in learning.	Requires integration of technology and media in learning (webinars, social networking sites, Avatars).
They want to be taught to retain information.	They want to be engaged to retain information.	They want to be engaged to retain information.
They are serious in class; learning and social activities should not be mingled.	They recognise learning as a social activity.	They recognize learning as a social activity.
They are self-motivated and focused on learning.	They are self-directed and self-paced.	They need an external drive to stay focused to learn.
Transformational learning style from classroom through participation and critical reflection.	Highly receptive to e-learning series of structured lectures.	Informal, incidental learning. Short attention span.

**Sources:** Kipnis and Childs, 2004; Weingarten, 2009;

### 3.0 Uniqueness of Learning and teaching in an ODL environment

Previous studies on generational teaching and learning are majorly focused on class room environments (Brown, 1997; Kipnis and Childs, 2004; Monaco and Martin, 2007). ODL environments differ in some ways and it is necessary to incorporate its peculiarities in analysis of teaching and learning incorporating generation considerations. ODL institutions tend to have a very diverse group of learners in terms of age, ethnic group, marital status, financial status, geographical location and social status compared to contact institutions. The diversity of learners poses numerous challenges to ODL systems. The effect of ODL on different generations is identified in Table 4.0.

**Table 4.0: Effect of ODL on different generations**

<b>BABY BOOMERS</b>	<b>GENERATION X</b>	<b>GENERATION Y</b>
In ability to see the lecturer face to face is a challenge.	In ability to see the lecturer face to face is a challenge.	In ability to see the lecturer face to face is a challenge.
Lack of instant feedback from lecturer is not a challenge as long as there will be a feedback.	Lack of instant feedback from lecturer is a challenge.	Lack of instant feedback from lecturer is a challenge.
Limitation of group study is a challenge.	Limitation of group study is a challenge but they tend to work independently.	Limitation of group study is a challenge but they tend to work independently.
Flexibility and self-paced study is an advantage.	Flexibility and self-paced study is an advantage.	Flexibility and self-paced study is an advantage.
Limited availability of material technologically is not a challenge as long as printed materials are available.	Limited availability of study material technologically is a challenge.	Limited availability of study material in a social technological environment is a challenge.
Limited availability of online sources like e-books is not a challenge as long as printed textbooks are available.	Limited availability of online sources like e-books is a challenge.	Limited availability of online sources like e-books is a challenge.

### 4.0 Possible Technologies for distant learning

A research undertaken by Cant and Bothma, 2010 identified and proposed different technologies that can be adopted for teaching and learning in a distant learning environment, which includes:

- CDs and DVDs
- Learning management system (LMS)
- Social networking services (such as Facebook, Twitter etc)

- Use of webinars and podcasting (short learning videos that are delivered via iPod, smart-/multimedia phones, or online)
- Internet/WWW (websites used to support module information activities, frequently-asked questions (FAQs), simple assessments, multiple-choice questions etc)
- Satellite and video conferencing (teleconferencing)
- Campus radio
- E-mail (interactive communication between lecturer and student)
- Chat or discussion forums (involving student-to student and lecturer-to-lecturer communications)
- Online teaching (online discussion classes)
- Automated assessment

The effectiveness of the proposed technologies by Cant and Bothma, 2010 has to be evaluated in terms of its suitability to address the challenges faced by different generations in an ODL institution.

### 5.0 Proposed mixed teaching and learning model

To learn effectively in an ODL environment, challenges identified in section 3.0 need to be addressed. To respond to these challenges a mixed model for teaching and learning has been proposed by the authors as shown in Table 5.0 taking into consideration that courses are designed to be outcomes based, students are prepared to be competent and relevant in the present generation, standard of education is not lowered for any reason and all learners have access to computer and internet.

**Table 5.0: Proposed Mixed teaching and learning model**

	<b>BABY BOOMERS</b>	<b>GENERATION X</b>	<b>GENERATION Y</b>
In ability to see the lecturer face to face.	Increase face to face discussion classes.	Employ Online teaching	Employ Online teaching
	Incorporating CDs and DVDs in the study material package.	Incorporating CDs and DVDs in the study material package.	Incorporating CDs and DVDs in the study material package.
	Increased use of satellite and video conferencing.	Increased use of satellite and video conferencing.	Increased use of satellite and video conferencing.
	Utilise campus radio	Utilise campus radio	Utilize campus radio

Lack of instant feedback from lecturer	Feedback posted in printed form.  Effective use of Learning management system (LMS).  Quick response to e-mail by lecturers.	Effective use of Learning management system (LMS).  Quick response to e-mail by lecturers. Websites used to support module information activities	Effective use of Learning management system (LMS).  Quick response to e-mail by lecturers. Websites used to support module information activities
Limitation of group study is a challenge.	Help to identify students in the same area and link them for group study.	Incorporating social networking services and use of webinars and podcasting.	Incorporating social networking services and use of webinars and podcasting.
Flexibility and self-paced study is an advantage.	Employ automated formative assessment for more flexibility.	Employ automated formative assessment for more flexibility.	Employ automated formative assessment for more flexibility.
Limited availability of material technologically	Incorporating CDs and DVDs in the study material package.  Use of webinars and podcasting	Incorporating CDs and DVDs in the study material package.  Use of webinars and podcasting	Incorporating CDs and DVDs in the study material package.  Use of webinars and podcasting
Limited availability of online sources like e-books	Availing online sources like e-books.	Availing online sources like e-books.	Availing online sources like e-books.

## 6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study discusses the influence of generational groupings: baby boomers, generation X and generation Y on teaching and learning in an open distant learning (ODL) environment. It identified the different social and personal characteristics of each generation and highlighted their effect on teaching and learning. The effect of ODL on each generation was pointed out. A mixed model was proposed to address the challenges using various technologies. A further study will be carried out using questionnaire to evaluate the proposed model.

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