



A phenomenological study of millennial students and traditional pedagogies



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ABSTRACT

Background: The Millennial generation comprises the majority of learners in the traditional university setting. Nurse educators identify problems developing teaching strategies in education that undergraduate Millennial nursing students find engaging and meaningful. The purpose of this study was to identify the perception of Millennial students participating in traditional pedagogies and its significant implications for nursing education.

Method: This interpretive phenomenological study recorded the lived experiences of Millennial nursing students' experiences in traditional classrooms. One on one interviews with 13 Millennial students were conducted. Data collection and analysis aligned with van Manen's method.

Results: There are five themes that emerged from the data: physically present, mentally dislocated; unspoken peer pressure; wanting more from the professors; surface learning; and lack of trust. The essence focuses around the central theme of belonging, while students identified the most significant challenge in a classroom was disengaging professors.

Conclusion: Recommendations for faculty to engage nursing students through a method of shared responsibility of educational approach are given. Blended teaching pedagogies that offer traditional and active methods are recommended.

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Background

One goal of nursing education programs must be to produce nursing graduates that can apply theory to practice. Theory-guided practice provides nurses with a framework for clinical decision-making and ensures accountability by increasing transparency of individual actions (Harvey, 2015). Four generations exist in the educational environment: the Veteran generation (1922–1945), the Baby Boomer generation (1945–1960), Generation X (1960–1980) and the millennial generation (1980–present) (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). Gaining insight into generational viewpoints helps to clarify the understanding of preferred learning pedagogies to optimize generational teacher/learner needs. Benner, Stephen, Leonard, and Day (2010) explores the divide of pedagogies of classroom (teacher focused) versus clinical practicum (learner focused), revealing student outcomes differentiation challenging traditional nursing pedagogy. The shift in nursing education brings forth many challenges, and the added complexity yields the need for the exploration of generational preferences.

Johanson (2012) identified a new group of students in the college setting, known as the Net Generation or Millennials, classifying them as

persons born after 1982. Many of the students currently enrolled in nursing programs are members of the Millennial generation (Johanson, 2012). College students age 18–34 years old are members of the Millennial generation and learn more easily with non-traditional pedagogies having been born with technology in their hands (Garwood, 2015). Traditional pedagogies have a teacher-centered approach to learning that is centered on transference of content measured upon the student's ability to recall content (Valiga, 2012).

The National League for Nursing's (NLN) (2012) call for transformation of nursing education reflects the need for a paradigm shift (Adams, 2014). The NLN suggests the need for nursing education to react to the needs of the current student population. Emphasis is placed on providing educational learning environments conducive to the new student population. Despite this initiative by the NLN, the idea lacks theory to practice application. The Millennial generation has a high sense of self-worth and believes they are unique (Montenery et al., 2013). The Millennial learners welcome structure and require frequent, positive reinforcement. These unique learners are group-oriented which poses problems to traditional individual learning in nursing programs that continue to use lecture and power point as the primary method of knowledge transference. The alignment of pedagogies of inquiry remains weak and Millennial students lack application of knowledge to practice. Pedagogy encompasses the nature of knowledge to include which material is taught, the method of teaching, and emergence of learning. Traditional

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approaches to pedagogy within nursing programs have been noted to be disengaging for students (Janzen, Perry, & Edwards, 2012). Research has argued that these students are easily bored in the traditional classroom setting (Chen, Moe Oo, Razack, & Yu, 2014).

Traditional pedagogies center upon the transference of content and information in a positivist form of knowledge expecting the same outcomes from each student (Horsfall, Cleary, & Hunt, 2012). The students are dependent upon teachers to give information which students are expected to memorize and reverberate without developing true content comprehension (Ironside, 2015). Each has preconceived roles, which guide the domains of traditional pedagogy. The results of research influence nursing education to produce graduates that can apply theory to practice providing safe, efficient care based upon individual patient needs (Garwood, 2015). Nursing faculty are challenged with creating an environment that amplifies student's preferred way of learning while continuing to align with program standards and criteria (Schams & Kuenner, 2012). The rapidly changing classroom and emergence of Millennial students present learning styles that may challenge traditional pedagogy. Traditional methods of teaching include didactic lecture, the use of PowerPoint slides, objective testing, and writing papers (Gibson & Sodeman, 2014). Methods of this magnitude involve the process of knowing rather than doing. Chen et al. (2014) highlight the need to understand more about Millennials and their personal engagement in traditional methods of learning. Nursing classrooms are changing rapidly as increasing numbers of Millennials arrive in college. Millennials remain to be the highest proportion of students enrolled undergraduate college population at 39.6%, add complexity and unique diversity to the college classroom (Whitney, 2014). This diversity as described by the Millennials is cognitive diversity, which is a blending of different backgrounds, perspectives within a team and a culmination of their experiences. The Millennials view cognitive diversity as a crucial element for innovation, and are 71% more likely to focus on teamwork (Conklin, 2012). Millennials are a generation born with technology in hand, and prefer experiential learning, collaborative approaches, and need feedback that is instantaneous. Whitney (2014) characterized the generation as learning in a somewhat different way than the previous verbal or visual generation. To prepare for the challenges of this group, it is imperative nurse educators examine preferred teaching methods, student learning styles, and needs in relation to traditional pedagogies. Nursing educators have a responsibility to facilitate student academic learning and evaluate outcomes (Adams, 2014).

A fundamental component of pedagogical practice lies in understanding different learning styles and learning preferences of nursing students. Nurse educators identify problems developing teaching strategies in education that undergraduate Millennial nursing students find engaging and meaningful (Garwood, 2015; Johanson, 2012). The need to define the preferred method of learning is even more crucial as annual pass rates of the NCLEX examination declined by 12% in 2008. Since October 1, 2010, Pennsylvania State Board of Nursing sanctions probation to nursing schools whose pass rates fall below 80% (PSBN, 2016). Despite the sanctions, only 90.34% of nurses eligible to take the NCLEX examination in 2012 were successful on their first attempt (NSBN, 2013). The growing need to capture 100% pass rates is crucial to the overall nursing shortage. As colleges strive to lower attrition rates and increase student retention, the perceptions of the students experience reveals needed information. Nurse educators must find ways to enhance the learning environment and develop methods that align with expectations of millennial students. Gaining insight into the perceptions of Millennial students being taught with traditional pedagogies can decrease student attrition, increase student retention, and directly benefit student success in nursing programs. There has been little evidence of research on factors that influence Millennial attrition in nursing programs (Harris, Rosenberg, & O'Rourke, 2014). The development of new pedagogical strategies

that align with learning styles can aid in academic success (Abele, Penprase, & Ternes, 2013).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify the perception of Millennial students participating in traditional pedagogies and its significant implications for nursing education. Knowing preferred methods of pedagogical practices desired of Millennials will define not what to teach but how to teach getting the message to the student. The fundamental facet of pedagogical approaches lies in gaining a clear, distinct understanding of students' learning styles and preferences to aid in academic success.

Methods

The chosen phenomenology was interpretive, or Heidegger hermeneutics, which aligns with the purpose. There are a number of concepts in interpretive phenomenology: "being-in-the-world," "forestructures," "life-world existential themes," and the "hermeneutic circle" (Touhy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith, 2013). As a researcher using phenomenology, one must understand the participants' points of view and recognize what influences the participant understanding and worldviews. Personal reflection on influences and biases must be acknowledged in interpretive phenomenology in order to be open to another person's meanings. The study was guided by one central research question: What is the lived experience of the Millennial nursing students in educational programs that use traditional nursing pedagogies? Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained at the University setting in which data were collected. The participants were solicited by using a formal letter via email and flyers throughout the campus. The subjects were selected base upon the following criteria: (1) birth year after 1982, (2) enrolled in a nursing program, (3) actively taking nursing courses, and (4) able to speak English. All responses to the email were followed via telephone to make an appointment for the interview. Details about informed consent, the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and a form explaining the purpose of the research was given to each participant prior to the start of data collection.

Setting and sample

Thirteen interviews were collected from Millennial students who were currently enrolled in a nursing course within a traditional BSN program. Twelve were female and one male. All participants were in the 18 to 24 year age category, with one being 20, three being 21, five being 22, three being 23, and one being 24. Five participants were senior nursing students, seven were junior nursing students, and one was a sophomore. The average time in college for this study's population was 3.6 years. The majority of the population had no employment ($n = 8$), while five worked part time. While the sample was homogeneous, this is a true reflection of the programs' enrolled students within their traditional BSN track.

Data collection and analysis

The interviews were conducted at the university in a private room. The interviews were collected on separate dates, so the room locations changed, but privacy was consistent. Each participant was asked the research question: What is the lived experience of the Millennial nursing students in educational programs that use traditional nursing pedagogies? As the interviews progressed, more questions were asked about engagement in the classroom setting. Interviews continued until data saturation was achieved during the last few interviews. Data collection concluded when analysis of the interviews revealed no new information.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim as close to the interviews as possible. Each recording was listened to five times and compared to the transcription to ensure accuracy. The data from the

interviews were analyzed using van Manen's methodology. Each interview was examined for "what does this mean?" or the sententious approach, and notes were made. Listening to each one of the interviews while reading the transcripts and field notes (written during the interview) revealed clarity of meaning within the participants' words and underlying meaning. Data were organized and managed using NVivo software. Similarities among the participants' descriptions were then placed on a working wall. The quotes from the participants grouped from the software were displayed while continual immersion and understanding of the data were analyzed. The grouping of nodes continued until the themes clearly emerged from the data. Comparing them to the original interview transcriptions validated the clusters of data.

Results

Five themes emerged from the data gathered from 13 interviews of Millennial nursing students. The emergent themes emanated from mined and coded data with NVivo software, which resulted in clustering of data. The themes in order of frequency were (a) Physically Present, Mentally Dislocated (b) Unspoken Peer Pressure (c) Passive Learning/Surface Learning (d) Wanting More from Professors/Disengaging Professors, and (e) Lack of Trust.

Theme 1: Physically present, mentally dislocated

Every student in the study reported going to class on the scheduled time and days. They described their attendance as: "always there, classroom time is mandatory, and present." Even though each student noted they attend class, they go on to describe being mentally dislocated. The students in the study gave exemplars of participating in a wide variety of events while in the classroom setting that set apart from paying attention. Participant A comment describes the general consensus among the participants:

"And then you go to class and this funny thing happens during class with its almost like maybe 50 people that are there, maybe a quarter are actually paying attention and trying to learn the material that is being presented at the time. The other 75% are doing work or an assignment that they have due later. Other people, they are on Facebook, or on Pinterest, or they are on Tumblr, it's almost like brain rehab time."

The students openly gave credence to wanting to be present and a good student; however distractors within the classroom setting stole their attention. In addition, students felt they were a number in the classroom and did not belong, thereby it wouldn't matter what activities they participated in the classroom setting.

Theme 2: Unspoken peer pressure

The students gave detailed accounts of the classroom environment and reveal their personal situatedness within the setting. The students identified that their peers have an influence inside the classroom. The students have a desire to learn but have pressure to conform to their peers. Participant A noted:

"You feel almost like peer pressure, like unspoken peer pressure, like if you're paying attention actually it's like "Wow she is actually writing notes. You are really paying attention to this right now? Um, almost like a peer pressure king of thing you almost feel like you're actually trying to learn it's not cool."

When the students felt as if they belonged through social interactions, they were more likely to be participatory within the classroom setting. Weighing heavily on social interactions, Millennials care about their peer opinions, which in turn dynamically can guide personal decisions. Most of the students in this study did not contribute in the classroom discussions for fear of what their peers will think. The students feared being labeled and not belonging.

Theme 3: Passive learning/surface learning

Participants spoke to the level of passive learning occurring within the traditional nursing classroom. The students speak of simply learning material for the test and give credence to surface learning. The students link the memorization and short term memory recall to prepare for their future careers. Participant I noted:

"Why do I have to memorize all of this? I can always quick look it up on the computer. A lot of the stuff we learn we are just learning to take a test, so it looks good."

The students within this study did not feel they needed more time in the classroom, but rather more hands on experience. Their ability to memorize data and pass examinations left them feel prepared to practice nursing. In addition, they felt they can look up data at any time to aid in their nursing practice.

Theme 4: Wanting more from professors/disengaging professors

Students also identified the need for wanting more from their professors. They described their professors as, "disconnected, not really teaching anything, confused, disengaging entertainers, unable to use technology, and not trained in education." The students had spent a considerable amount of time discussing the frustrations of professors who merely read off of the Power Points. Participant G noted:

"That I am not being taught as well as I could be." "That I see my professors and I see them as very well trained nurses, or nurse practitioners, um, clinicians, but, they, none of the teachers, have been trained in education." "My teachers are molding what they have been taught and there are better ways." "Um, and it's really frustrating because I have had in the past many other schools, many other teachers, that are of other disciplines, and I have had some amazing teachers. My favorite teachers I have ever had, none of them are in nursing."

The lack of interaction from the professor to the student in terms of engagement leave the students disconnected from the classroom and the content. The students desired more interaction that would help them belong in the classroom. Active strategies described yield hands on application, critical thinking exercises, case studies, and creative ways to teach content.

Theme 5: Lack of trust

Lastly the students gave various examples of how they do not trust the professors and how it creates challenges for them in the classroom. The need to find "correct" information after receiving the data through traditional pedagogies leaves the students' frustrated in the delivery. Throughout the text, the students expressed "not trusting the professors". This trust was related to how they felt about the instructors' knowledge. The students preferred to look up information on the internet for reliable information; wishing that the instructors would say less and only give pertinent information. Participant D noted:

"The clinical experiences are the best part. I trust the nurse over the instructor on knowledge. Being paired with a nurse instead of an instructor would be more beneficial."

The students elaborated on needing professors that are "passionate" to teach. Exemplars of guest speakers who work in the field and are passionate about the topics gave the students the "correct" perspective. The entertainment value inside the classroom is mandatory for the millennial learner. The students have a list of expectations when they enter the classroom. When personal expectations are not met, the student struggle to find meaning in the course and assign blame to the professor and not to themselves. However, when the students had a "relationship" with the professor, then trust was not an issue. The need to be connected and belong to a group is expediential to Millennials as they seek connectivity and cohesiveness to their peers and faculty members.

Discussion

The essence of the study was found by extracting from the dialogue in the language of the participants to form a structure of the experience. The essence of the study focuses upon belonging. The students are new to the college environment and changing environments reveal a need to find oneself. The meaning of this study is that the Millennial students yearn for a sense of belonging. The experiences of each participant was examined and sought to be meaning to their experience. The essence illuminated throughout the study was one of belonging with their peers, their colleagues, and their professors.

The significance of the research study is in the insight it provides to nursing educators about the Millennial generation. The Millennial generation has grown up in a time where they were told they were the best of the best (Nikirk, 2012; Tapscott, 2009). However, the collegial education setting reveals a different story. Although students meet the physical representation in class, they often seem to be mentally dislocated, looking for peer acceptance, blame shortcomings on professors, and engage in surface learning. The need to belong hinders the students from active engagement in the educational process.

As colleges strive to lower attrition rates and increase student retention, the perceptions of the students experience reveals needed information. Information gained from this research uncovered unique vantage points of the Millennial students, offering suggestions for new teaching styles that may accentuate the learning process. Some of the students from the study revealed non-traditional methods such as role playing (active learning), group work (collaborative learning), team presentations (cooperative learning), and case studies (problem-based learning) that help to engage them in the classroom. Nursing leaders can learn from the participants' experience and modify the classroom to engage with the students and build a relationship of mutual trust.

Experiential learning that encompasses technology and evidence based educational strategies can lead to a more interactive classroom environment that draws the Millennial's attention (Montenery et al., 2013). Clickers have been used as an interactive mechanism that connects students to lecture. Educators can give reasonable classroom assignments prior to classroom time, use the assignment to deliver material, and enhance student participation within the setting. A new model of active and passive delivery may appeal to this generation and aid to ensure delivery of content, participation of students, and mental engagement within the traditional classroom setting.

Unlike previous generations, Millennials place a significant value on relationships and peer input. Nurse educators are challenged to meet the needs of Millennial nursing students who are enrolled in nursing programs (Fettig & Friesen, 2014). Peer interactions whether positive or negative have direct correlation to learning experiences. Offering peer support programs such as studying with a peer, learning study habits, or explanation of material from peers provide a way for Millennials to connect. Faculty should encourage and help to develop an internal network of students that can create a cohesive student network that drives toward quality educational outcomes.

Students within this study also give credence to surface learning and learning material only for the test without retention and applicability to the clinical setting. As the NCLEX examination and clinical practice focuses upon knowledge application, educators are forced to find methods that accentuate knowledge application. Johanson (2012) highlighted that instead of an active learning paradigm shift that a shared responsibility of educational approach is necessary.

The interviews highlighted Millennials being the best of the best despite doing mediocre work (Robinson, Scollan-Koliopoulos, Kamienski, & Burke, 2012). Understanding the meaning of wanting more from the professors, educators should work Millennials in groups, use debates, and blending teaching pedagogies (Johanson, 2012). Educators should provide Millennials with quick reliable information.

Limitations

Limitations of this study can be found in the population sample of twelve women and only one male. However, it is representative of the population of male versus female in the nursing profession. In 2013, approximately 11.1% of the baccalaureate programs enrollees were male (AACN, 2013). In addition, the homogeneity of the sample selection from one school may or may not be reflective of a classroom culture or institutional values. However, the sample size is representative of the students enrolled in the nursing program at the selected University. Ethnicity is another limitation in this study as twelve out of thirteen participants were Caucasian. The final limitation lies in only examining nursing students experience in the classroom. Nursing students may have unique classroom experience than other college Millennial students.

Implications

Millennial students bring unique characteristics to traditional college classrooms. The unique personalities, values, and collaborative nature of Millennials also make them different in how they engage the classroom. Although educators use active strategies in the class, millennial nursing students remain to struggle to find meaning in the classroom. Stifled by their sense of belonging, Millennials place little value on the traditional classroom despite being ultimately successful and passing NCLEX. The students within this study placed emphasis on positive relationships with their peers and professors, which ultimately provided to a more collaborative classroom environment, which enhanced learning. Nursing educators, who are well educated on blending active and traditional pedagogies, will be better able to instruct this generation. Formulating an educational approach that is personalized can transform the classroom and potentially formulate a deeper understanding of knowledge and embody the sense of belonging. As the millennial students continue to transform the classroom environment, educators must find integrals ways to enhance knowledge acquisition.

Recommendations

As most nursing classrooms house multigenerational students, faculty and students must collectively work together to have an equal balance of pedagogies that appeal to the students while still meeting academic rigor. More research is needed to see the effects of these methods and the knowledge acquisition and applicability of the content provided by the educators. Future research includes repeating the study with a different group of Millennial nursing students to validate the themes identified.

Conclusion

Millennial students bring unique characteristics to traditional college classrooms. Although educators use active strategies in the class, Millennial nursing students remain to struggle to find meaning in the classroom. Stifled by their sense of belonging, Millennials place little value on the traditional classroom despite being ultimately successful and passing NCLEX. Emphasis on positive relationships with their peers and professors can provide a more collaborative classroom environment, which ultimately can enhance learning. As the Millennial students continue to transform the classroom environment, educators must find integrals ways to enhance knowledge acquisition.

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