



A paratrooper takes a selfie with his cell phone 11 December 2010 before boarding a C-17 aircraft at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Selfies have become ubiquitous among millennials and more recent generations. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Sharilyn Wells, U.S. Army)

# Motivating and Educating Millennials

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**E**ducators and senior leaders in the U.S. Army must know how to identify with, understand, and adapt to the needs of the millennial generation to

ensure Army education achieves the required core objectives. Understanding the common and defining characteristics of millennials and of future generations enhances the learning environment. Understanding generational differences allows for a more informed staff and faculty. Professional military education (PME) instructors must consider generational differences and individual learning preferences for efficacy.

As of February 2019, the millennial generation comprised 82 percent of the U.S. Army, according to Headquarters, Department of the Army Personnel Military Strength Analysis and Forecasting Directorate. Moreover, millennials are the largest generation in U.S. history. Their birth years are generally accepted to run from 1980 to 2000, which totals nearly seventy-eight million live births.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the characteristics and collective themes that define this generation will be important to all educators committed to tailoring their educational approach to be most effective for this generation's learning. This will require awareness of the widespread misconceptions and misunderstandings about this generation that may cause unnecessary confusion in the adult education system.<sup>2</sup>

## Purpose and Importance

This article focuses specifically on education and generational considerations for this important segment of the U.S. Army. To properly address the learning needs of this generation, all instructors and Army leaders who are responsible for the education, training, and the professional development of soldiers throughout their careers need to understand the myths, stereotypes, and trends of millennials and the next generation of soldiers, Generation Z. Considering the overwhelming proportion of young adults in the military, integrating what is known about this and future generations of soldiers into revisions to PME and Army learning models will directly benefit soldiers, the institution, and readiness by ensuring soldiers are best prepared for current and future missions.

As S. Clinton Hinote and Timothy J. Sundvall noted, taking the time to understand the fundamental values, beliefs, and views that shape this generation will only provide better cohesion.<sup>3</sup> For the Army, a review of literature and subsequent qualitative and quantitative research regarding educational approaches best suited for millennials will highlight ways senior leaders can educate and motivate millennial soldiers to leverage the current generation's strengths and directly influence lifelong education requirements for the foreseeable future. Ultimately, application of appropriate educational approaches in both brick-and-mortar and distance-learning environments, whether in garrison or on the battlefield, will improve the Army's readiness as it prepares for large-scale combat operations with near-peer adversaries.

## Literature Review

To identify potentially relevant literature, the keyword search included academic and peer-reviewed databases related to education and millennials. The search included the following key terms: millennials, Generation Y, Generation Z, generation gaps, adult education, motivation, learning models, U.S. Army, lifelong learning, change in adult education landscape, technology and education, Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development System, and workplace education. These terms allowed for a comprehensive examination of the literature, research, studies, and exploration of the millennial generation to provide recommendations to advance the U.S. Army's approach to educating millennials who currently make up the preponderance of the active duty force.

The libraries and databases used to gather information, studies, research, and literature included the Pennsylvania State University Online Library; ERIC (ProQuest); ProQuest Education Journals; Google Scholar; El Paso Public Library Westside Branch; Amazon Books; the U.S. Army's homepage and subsequent databases; and Headquarters, Department of the Army G-1 (personnel) database and intranet portal.

This search focused on literature published since 2006 to conduct a current analysis of the millennial generation's educational practices, desire to learn, and classroom behaviors specific to lifelong learning. An exhaustive review of early research beginning shortly after the first millennials were born, 1980

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being the earliest, was also important in establishing, reviewing, and highlighting trends over time specific to this group of adult learners.

The literature review examined the significant work of education pioneers and other subject-matter experts in the field of adult education. Specifically, David A. Kolb provided the initial theoretical foundation for experiential learning, while *The Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* provided the context, the history, and current philosophies surrounding experiential learning and adult education.<sup>4</sup> Finally, William Strauss and Neil Howe's book *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*, provided information for this article regarding understanding generational differences and how they affect learning and motivation over time.<sup>5</sup>

## Comparative Methods of Analysis: Who Are the Millennials?

Understanding the characteristics of millennials identified through empirical studies helps to understand how the nuances of generational differences impact learning.

The idea of generational differences was introduced in Strauss and Howe.<sup>6</sup> The authors present a model based on the assumption that the year they were born and the generation in which they were raised form a person's approach to everything in life. Each generation has distinctive frames of reference, including values, attitudes, and traits that influence how they see work, life, and health.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to understand the generation's perspectives and trends regarding motivation and education. Specifically, these are significant considerations for the Army as it strives to motivate and educate millennials. Strauss and Howe and other social philosophers define a generation as a cohort group with common traits and characteristics.<sup>8</sup> Strauss and Howe expand and "base the length of a generational cohort-group on the length of a phase of life."<sup>9</sup>

The millennials are the largest generation in U.S. history with nearly seventy-eight million young adults born between 1980 and 2000.<sup>10</sup> Although the term "millennials" is the generally accepted designation for this generation, other terms are also widely used: Generation Y, Generation iY, Generation Z, the Digital Generation, the Internet Generation, Nexters, Screenagers, Bridgers, Electronic Natives, the Net Generation, and the Sunshine Generation.<sup>11</sup> Even within this group, nuanced

differences exist between the first and second decades as a result of pervasive access to digital technology.

Thom S. Rainer and Jess Rainer conducted a study that included 1,200 millennials in the United States; the research included only those born in the first decade (1980–1991) of the generation.<sup>12</sup> The research participants were demographically representative of the U.S. millennials population as a whole. The findings coincide with similar research studies showing that millennials are multitaskers and tech savvy, desirous of instant gratification and recognition, and focused on work-life balance and flexibility, collaboration, and career advancement. In addition, millennials have unique learning differences that require development to be aligned with their needs.<sup>13</sup>

The Rainer and Rainer study identified some overarching characteristics about this generation and what it collectively values.<sup>14</sup> Its findings suggest that millennials are a generation that have tremendous hope for the future. Three out of four millennials believe it is their role in life to serve others.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, they are a generation that, as a whole, want to make a positive difference for the future on a grand scale.<sup>16</sup> That millennials are the "trophy generation" (where everyone gets a trophy) and that they have been raised by "helicopter parents" (parents who hover and help oversee every decision they make) influenced their view of themselves, of the world, and of what is possible. This generation was told routinely they were special; that the individuals of this generation were the "wanted" generation of children and were therefore raised to believe they could become anything that they want, no matter what their natural abilities or their limitations. As a consequence, they are generous, adventurous, protected, sheltered, and diverse, and yet they tend to be incredibly harmonious. They view themselves as civic-minded peacekeepers and have a strong desire to achieve greatness for themselves and their communities. They work well in teams, and they thrive in groups and on teamwork because they have been raised to believe that is the best way to approach anything and everything—from sports to schoolwork. This generation expects problems to be solved in a participatory and collective manner.<sup>17</sup> Millennials value diversity (racial and cultural) and push for tolerance and equality more so than generations before them; they firmly believe in openness and acceptance. Rainer and Rainer further noted that "the

Millennials represent the most racially and ethnically diverse nation in America’s history.”<sup>18</sup>

A 2008 research project titled “Gaining the Edge: Connecting with the Millennials” echoes those common cohort characteristics and considers the impact on U.S. Air Force recruiters.<sup>19</sup> When collectively assessing how the U.S. Army recruits millennials and expects a commitment of lifelong learning, understanding how best to educate this generation, and the next, has great importance for the institution.

### Millennials in the U.S. Army

With 82 percent of the U.S. Army from the millennial generation, the characteristics and collective themes that define it are important to all Army educators. This includes awareness of widespread misconceptions and misunderstandings about this generation that cause unnecessary confusion in the adult education arena.<sup>20</sup>

Table 1 provides the breakdown of the active duty Army force numbers in several categories. The top half shows the number of total soldiers in the active duty Army as of 28 February 2019. The breakdown is specific to gender, enlisted soldiers, commissioned officers, warrant officers, and cadets (who will commission following college graduation). The total active duty Army force numbers for each category respectively are highlighted for a collective total of 470,623 soldiers. Millennial soldiers, born between 1 January 1980 and 31 December 2000, total 410,308 soldiers, or 82 percent of the active duty Army’s current force.

### U.S. Army’s Projected Population in 2025

Table 2 (on page 44) highlights the projected population for the active duty Army force numbers in the

**Table 1. Breakdown of Millennials in Active Duty Army as of 28 February 2019**

Total active duty Army force			
	Female	Male	Total
<b>Enlisted</b>	54,100	320,940	375,040
<b>Commissioned officers</b>	14,674	62,236	76,910
<b>Warrant officers</b>	1,362	12,797	14,159
<b>Cadets</b>	1,038	3,476	4,514
<b>Total</b>	<b>71,174</b>	<b>399,449</b>	<b>470,623</b>

Millennials			
	Female	Male	Total
<b>Enlisted</b>	50,271	293,920	344,191
<b>Commissioned officers</b>	10,904	42,658	53,562
<b>Warrant officers</b>	824	7,693	8,517
<b>Cadets</b>	879	3,159	4,038
<b>Total</b>	<b>62,878</b>	<b>347,430</b>	<b>410,308</b>

(Table by author; information provided by Headquarters, Department of the Army Personnel Military Strength Analysis & Forecasting Directorate)

year 2025. The table is categorized into four generations—baby boomers, Generation X, millennials, and Generation Z—who will serve either as enlisted soldiers, officers, or cadets in 2025. The chart shows both the numbers and percentages for each category. This includes those who would serve from Generation Z (those with a date of birth between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2019). This breakdown projects the numbers for each category, respectively, with a collective total of 490,000 soldiers. In 2025, enlisted soldiers are expected to make up 45.1 percent, while officers are projected to make up 20.4 percent of all the force. Most notable is that 100 percent of cadets—those in

**Table 2. Projected Population of Active Duty Army for Calendar Year 2025 as of 28 February 2019**

**Total Army force projections 2025**

	Birth years	Age range in 2025	Enlisted	Officers	Cadets*
<b>Baby boomers</b>	1940–1959	66–85	—	—	—
<b>Generation X</b>	1960–1979	46–65	2.2%	7.5%	—
<b>Millennials</b>	1980–1999	26–45	52.7%	72.1%	—
<b>Generation Z</b>	2000–2019	6–25	45.1%	20.4%	100.0%

  

<b>Millennials</b>	1980–1999	—	208,792	64,383	—
<b>Total force</b>	—	—	<b>396,190</b>	<b>89,297</b>	<b>4,513</b>

(Table by author; information provided by Headquarters, Department of the Army Personnel Military Strength Analysis & Forecasting Directorate; \*projected)

behind the learning requests of others in order to commit to learning. The overall view of materials empowers them to determine how much time they will invest in new learning and how engaged they will be in the process. Additionally, Kevin S. Thompson discusses the need for this generation to have learning support preferences due to their upbringing with “helicopter parenting” and the need to understand the immediate appli-

college—will be from the next generation by 2025. It is important to note that the *National Defense Strategy* could change this projection, given the need for the Army to grow or decrease in size in the next eight years.

**Motivating and Educating Future Generations and Implications for Education**

The millennials are on track to become the United States’ most educated generation. In 2007, the twenty-five- to twenty-nine-year-old age group was entirely comprised of millennials, and 30 percent had attained a college degree.<sup>21</sup> This has significant implications and impacts for the readiness of the U.S. Army as well as the education process and learning styles of these millennial student-soldiers. The autonomy expected of student-soldiers in a learning environment, especially given the emphasis on the Army’s learning model, may be a challenge with this generation.<sup>22</sup>

Millennials appreciate big-picture understanding, new information, and rapid application to help them learn quickly and perform well on the job. Millennials wish to understand the context and motivations

of acquiring new knowledge.<sup>23</sup> Millennials typically prefer not to be detailed and in-depth in their educational pursuits. In fact, millennials are focused on what they want to learn and why and are quite interested in applying new knowledge to work with significant discussion.<sup>24</sup>

As the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) looks for new, creative, and cost-effective ways to create an environment of continuous education, having a baseline understanding of what individually motivates these generations will ensure PME and Army Leader Development Program courses evolve to meet the needs of the organization specific to the majority of the soldier-student population. Specifically, creating interactive and entertainment-based educational tools, rather than the prescriptive and individually focused self-structured development curriculum that is meant to force soldiers to continually educate, is a likely output of developing and improving senior leaders’ understanding and appreciation for generations that are much different than their own.

Millennials prefer having the option to learn independently or in small groups to deepen their

understanding of new information. Thompson notes that millennials focus on what they want to learn and expect to be told upfront the important application of the curriculum.<sup>25</sup> Without an understanding of the value of the learning, millennials may disengage from the learning process prior to meeting established learning objectives. While they value independent learning in some contexts, complete independence is not a characteristic that they cherish.<sup>26</sup> This is important for educators to recognize because this generation requires substantial and “significant discussion” before applying new knowledge to work and respond well to “structured content delivery and the ability to resubmit work to improve grades.”<sup>27</sup> This also has significant implications for course curriculum designers in classroom, distance learning, and blended learning environments. For those who educate student-soldiers in the U.S. Army, recognizing this trait is important because social and cognitive presence as well as autonomy will all be affected.

To establish healthy training and educational programs that contribute to the well-being of organizations, the learning styles, values, and preferences of each generation must be considered.<sup>28</sup> Laura Holyoke and Erick Larson’s findings “showed that teachers and trainers of adult learners need to be aware of generational characteristics when developing lesson plans and training materials. Combining generational understanding with current adult learner theory provides a unique teaching as well as learning experience.”<sup>29</sup> Holyoke and Larson also looked at readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn.<sup>30</sup> Of particular interest and worthy of consideration is the suggestion that teachers allow students to personalize their assignments so that they are relevant to their real-life situation and employment. Additionally, Thompson discusses the need for this generation to have learning support preferences due to their upbringing with hovering parents and the need to understand the immediate application of acquiring new knowledge.<sup>31</sup> Thompson’s research found that millennials respond well and may perform better when a learning support system is in place.<sup>32</sup>

## Experiential Learning and Millennials

Army leadership recognized education curriculum and delivery needed to be redesigned in order to

match the decentralized decision-making processes used on the battlefield and in garrison. To ensure readiness and survivability in situations involving life or death, soldiers must possess the necessary skills and resources to critically analyze information and make sound decisions. Therefore, the Army redesigned its approach to formal education. The Army learning concept (ALC) is outlined in TRADOC Pamphlet 525-8-2, *The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015*. The approach to education focuses primarily on adaptability and readiness.

The model would develop adaptable Soldiers and leaders who have the cognitive, interpersonal, and cultural skills necessary to make sound judgments in complex environments. The model must have an adaptive development and delivery system, not bound by brick and mortar, but one that extends knowledge to Soldiers at the operational edge is capable of updating learning content rapidly and is responsive to Operational Army needs. The model must be capable of sustained adaptation.<sup>33</sup>

This idea was a dramatic shift for the U.S. Army from teacher-centered to learner-centered environments and focuses on the experiences of student-soldiers and how they can critically apply knowledge in real-world situations. The ALC closely models David Kolb’s experiential learning theory.<sup>34</sup> In practice, the ALC is applied as the Army Learning Model (ALM), defined as follows:

The Army’s adaptive, continuous learning model that is routinely improved to provide quality, relevant, and effective learning experiences through outcome-oriented instructional strategies that foster thinking, initiative, and provide operationally relevant context which extends learning beyond the learning institution in a career-long continuum of learning through the significantly expanded use of network technologies.<sup>35</sup>

The U.S. Army currently uses the ALM to design, develop, and implement professional military education courses. Redesigned PME curriculum extends learning beyond the institution by incorporating blended learning environments through which student-soldiers are able to engage in formal education without the

traditional access restrictions of regardless of time or distance. As a result, lifelong learning is no longer merely a slogan or catchphrase; it is an apt description of soldiers' expectations and instituted measures to ensure continual professional learning and development.

Kolb's learning theory incorporates four learning styles: accommodating, diverging, converging, and as-

accomplish its mission, the Army must be capable of adapting to the ever-changing operational requirements. To do that, ensuring employee creativity, enthusiasm, and critical thinking must be a priority. George Lazaroiu states that when workers are enthusiastic about their work for the sake of the work itself, rather than being motivated by the expectation that their work will bring

“Facilitators not only must gain commitment from their students to actively engage in the learning process but also must show that, as educators, they too are devoted to improving their knowledge, intellectual abilities, and their overall growth in learning alongside the student-soldiers.”

simulating.<sup>36</sup> Understanding learning styles is important not just for individual students but also for the instructor. An understanding of learning styles allows the facilitators to create a learning environment that is respectful of every student; open to all students' ideas, ways of thinking, and experiences; and considerate of how every person learns differently. The ALM and Kolb's experiential learning theory help the instructor establish such a classroom environment, one in which each student feels comfortable sharing and debating ideas to pave the way for a better non-commissioned officer corps and Army. Specifically, the instructor must ensure that each student feels valued and contributes routinely regardless of the topic or subject matter. To accomplish this, facilitators not only must gain commitment from their students to actively engage in the learning process but also must show that, as educators, they too are devoted to improving their knowledge, intellectual abilities, and their overall growth in learning alongside the student-soldiers. The teacher can assist every student's journey and success by encouraging creativity, critical thinking, honest dialogue, and meaningful and facts-based debates to help shape a more strategic assessment of whatever topic is being taught. The ALM allows for experiences to inform the subject matter and drive student-centered, dialogue-directed learning.

Fostering creativity in employees (soldiers and student-soldiers) is a useful and effective way to maintain readiness and competitiveness for the organization. To

about some kind of reward, the results are better.<sup>37</sup> Motivating student-soldiers throughout their lifelong learning process in the Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development System program is a cornerstone of effective education practice.

Deborah L. Roberts, Lori R. Newman, and Richard M. Schwartzstein conducted extensive research into the intergenerational tension between teachers and learners in the medical profession education.<sup>38</sup> Collectively, they offer twelve tips for facilitating millennials' learning. Key recommendations include understanding the concept of generational differences and the potential intergenerational tension that may impact learning. The data also recognized that, unlike previous generations, millennials require constant guidance and reminders to apply critical thinking skills. Specifically, the authors note that this generation of learners are used to fun, game-like, interactive, and engaging materials that often have an appealing look and feel.<sup>39</sup>

It is important to note that not all researchers on the subject agree with the assertion that the attributes and characteristics of this generation are altogether different from previous generations. Specifically, some contend that the tenets of motivation in the classroom remain largely unchanged. The challenge is ensuring educators and administrators understand millennials and how to connect with them to best motivate and subsequently educate them. However, this does not necessarily require new approaches toward motivation. For example, Raymond A. Katzell and Donna E. Thompson examined various



motivational theories and practices, and they created a chart of useful and sensible approaches that are still immensely relevant to motivating learners in the classroom.<sup>40</sup>

## Application/Recommendations for Research/Implications

There are numerous recommendations for continued research specific to how millennials learn and what motivates them to do so.

TRADOC should continue to look at this generation from a PME angle and consider the implications of how the institution as a whole is reacting to “how” it is teaching and the “who”—the target population of millennials. Another consideration is to have the Center of Army Lessons Learned begin consolidating operational feedback from the combat training centers and the centers of excellence across the Army to look at new initiatives in education. One example might include looking at how unit organization leadership at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, has encouraged the use of Khan Academy (an educational organization that provides free instructional videos on various subjects for students and educators) as a method to reach its younger generation. TRADOC should

A soldier with 1st Squadron, 32nd Cavalry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), operates his character within the *Virtual Battlespace System* 12 February 2015 during a training event at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. The intent of the event is to provide soldiers with intelligence training to better provide feedback while on patrols. (Photo by Sgt. Samantha Parks, U.S. Army)

consider the benefits of this practice, which incurs no cost to the government. The potential benefit may yield and codify best practices that have emerged to share across the entire Army force. Additionally, designing curriculum that leverages various digital technologies to connect with, even entertainment-based mediums, advances the knowledge of soldiers, and builds on their experiences to be more critical thinkers and leaders, which must be a top priority for educators in the U.S. Army.

Furthermore, the individuals of Generation Z, the next generation of soldiers, are currently in their early teen years. Understanding what that cohort expects from an education perspective is critical for the Army. Research predicts that Generation Z might create a disruption in higher education: “It is anticipated that



Gen Zers will continue to prefer practical and hands-on learning given their desire for meaningful experiences. This predisposition will continue to raise the bar on active learning classrooms and pedagogy.”<sup>41</sup>

## Edutainment

According to Eric P. Werth and Loredana Werth, one of the best ways to motivate and educate millennials is through the use of gaming technology in the classroom, both in the traditional sense and online.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, the authors highlight the U.S. Army’s “America’s Army” education program to assist with recruiting as one of the most prominent and effective ways to integrate the skill sets and know-how of gaming into the academic environment. The authors note that America’s Army was developed in 2002 in order to directly pursue the target audience of potential recruits—millennials. In fact, others who work within TRADOC have noted the importance of incorporating what has been termed “edutainment” as a primary source of reaching this generation of student-soldiers.

Keith Ferguson, an instructional designer for TRADOC, wrote in a December 2016 article that the Army needs to embrace “edutainment,” a term he defines as a combination of education and entertainment, which the Walt Disney Company began using in 1948.<sup>43</sup> He further explains that “Disney was attempting to educate as well as entertain at a time when many other educational products such as filmstrips, movies, and other multimedia forms were primarily focused on education and information.”<sup>44</sup> Ferguson adds that for millennials, learning is most effective when it is entertaining, and “if the content and delivery of education is not entertaining enough, it may not be appreciated or valued.”<sup>45</sup> Others experts in education echo this sentiment and suggest the following:

Those involved in education or training at any level must be both cognizant of the characteristics of Millennials and competent in the educational practices shown to be effective with this generation. Instructors should take it upon themselves to research the Millennial generation and develop plans on how their current practices could be altered to better meet the needs of these individuals.<sup>46</sup>

Clearly, not all classroom presentations can be edutainment based. However, where appropriate, incorporation of these ideas can enhance learning and increase retention by making learning fun and memorable.

## Conclusion

Millennials currently make up the significant majority of the U.S. Army and will continue to do so for the next twenty years. Understanding the keys to educating and motivating this generation is imperative for the growth and development of soldiers as well as the readiness of the Army itself in order to retain its best and brightest. Designing curriculum that leverages various digital technologies, even entertainment-based media, to connect with, advance the knowledge of, and build on soldiers’ experiences to be more critical thinkers and leaders must be a top priority for the leaders in this organization. Holding tight to practices of the past limits the Army’s ability to create a true learning environment and a mentality of lifelong learning in its members. Willingness to understand, appreciate, and value the millennial generation’s ways of absorbing and applying new information is essential in maintaining competitiveness, adaptability, flexibility, and evolution for soldiers and the U.S. Army as a whole. ■

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