

Gen Y experiences of studying in higher education

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to describe and analyze the experiences relating to studies of Gen Y students in higher education. The theoretical approach relies on Mannheim (1952) who defined generation as a group of people born and raised in the same general chronological, social and historical context. The interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) served a methodological setting that reveres the students' experience worlds (Smith et al., 2009). There were 13 students who participated in the study, and the research was carried out in the form of semi-structured interviews. The data were latent content analysed (Kondracki et al., 2002; Krippendorff, 2004). Findings include three phenomenological themes as core elements: time balance, meaningfulness and reciprocal participation. Based on the results, we suggest three crucial dimensions for creating an empowering social space in the HE, namely: the social nature of teaching and learning, the social network extension of practices, and communal authenticity.

Key words: Gen Y, higher education, teacher education, interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA)

Introduction

Most of today's university students were born after 1980 and are therefore categorized as Generation Y (Gen Y). They have several labels: Millennial Generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000), the 'Internet Generation' or the 'Digital Natives' (Prensky, 2001). Much of the current literature is based on the assumption that this generation differs from the previous generations in its work values and career expectations (e.g. Alsop, 2008; Ng & Gosset, 2013; Twenge & Campbell, 2008). However, while there is some evidence to suggest that Gen Y also has different expectations of education, learning styles and patterns of behavior (Boggs & Szabo, 2011; Twenge, 2009), relatively few empirical studies have focused on the Gen Y-ers' influence on the learning environment in higher education (HE).

In this study, we are interested in the Gen Y-ers' experiences of studying in HE. We approach generation according to Mannheim (1952), who defined generation as a group of people born and raised in the same general chronological, social and historical context. He stressed both generational location and formative experiences during the time of youth as key determinants of generation. Mannheim's definition of generation considers the chronological and socio-historical approach, perceiving generation as cohort who shares a 'collective consciousness or memory' (cf. Edmunds & Turner, 2002).

Differences between generations are explained to emerge because of the powerful influences in the environment within the socialization years, having impact on the development of personality, values, beliefs and expectations (Macky et al., 2008). Gen Y were born in the era when the Internet was established in the early 1980s, and IT became integral part of their social and personal life (Macon & Artley, 2009). The worrying global events reached rapidly every home: the sinking of the Baltic ferry Estonia (1994); the September 11 terrorist attacks (2001); the Asian Tsunami (2004);

school shootings in Finland and Norway attacks in 2000s; and the environmental threats, especially regarding climate change.

However, the Gen Y has also been referred to as the Gen Sunshine and Gen Me (Huntley, 2006; Twenge, 2006, 2009). The descriptions are related to a societal cultural shift in which the parenthood became a choice. Gen Y can therefore be seen as being the most precious generation of children. They were raised with overall dedication and approval, and educated with continuous encouragement reinforcing their strengths and constructing self-esteem (Twenge 2006; Alsop, 2008; Broadbridge et al. 2007). This positive disposition may contribute to valuing the high achievement and strong hope of fairness and equity. Therefore, this study makes a contribution by presenting a phenomenological inquiry into this theme. Our research question is: What are the Gen Y students' experiences of studying in HE?

Context of the study

The study was conducted in a multi-disciplinary research university in 2013, in the context of Secondary Teacher Education Program (STEP). This particular group form a small sub-group, i.e., a 'generation unit' (cf. Mannheim, 1952) regarding their life experience. The STEP is an academic minor (60 ECTS) provided by the tripartite cooperation of *the Faculty of Education (FE)*, *the Disciplinary Faculties (DF)* and *the Teacher Training School (TTS)*. The challenge in implementing the STEP has been the coordination between the three parties due to their varied disciplinary cultures, course schedules and assignments. According to students' feedback, the overall workload is extremely heavy. In recent years, the students' dissatisfaction has increased, which motivated to conduct this study.

Data and analysis

The research was carried out in the form of semi-structured interviews. The participants were gathered by email contact through the students' union list. In all, 13 students (10 females, 3 males) responded positively to the invitation: six of them represented social sciences, three math and science, and four language sciences. All respondents were born in the 1980s. The interviews lasted 35-60 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed.

The interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) served a methodological setting that reveres the students' experience worlds. IPA is developed out of Heidegger (1927/1962) and Gadamer's (1960/1975) philosophical world views, and coined on the idea that people make the meanings of lived experience from a perspective where the conscious subject is related to a particular time and place. In this study, we stress on students attempts to make meaning of their experiences focusing on the STEP studies.

The data were latent content analysed (Krippendorff, 2004) by using an abductive research strategy first introduced by Peirce (1966). The findings reported here proceed in four analysis phases: close reading, organising, categorizing, and summarizing. Based on these phases, we found that three main themes clearly described the collective basis of the Gen Y students' experiences in the studies, namely *time balance*, *reciprocal participation* and *meaningfulness*.

Key findings

The findings drew a picture of these Gen Y-ers as idealistic, sociable, and achievement oriented students. The results indicated conflicting approaches to *time* between the students and the university. The students had a particular perception of time that emphasizes autonomy and independence. The focus was on time management regarding personal time and time required by the system (cf. Nowotny, 1994). Furthermore, the students expected that the trust relations within the students and university staff should be based on *reciprocal participation*, shared communication, fairness and values, and should be negotiated. Finally, the students shared their need for the studies to fulfill their expectations of *meaningfulness*. On the one hand, they admired the cultural habits they have been socialized, on the other hand, they criticized them. They challenged the authorities – university teachers – to recognize and empower their full potential.

Based on the results, we suggest three crucial dimensions for creating an empowering social space in the HE that enables the students to be sufficiently prepared for future challenges in their careers. The dimensions are: the social nature of teaching and learning, the social network extension of practices, and communal authenticity. Accordingly, the findings indicate that there is no doubt that this new generation will challenge the traditions of schooling when they themselves end up working as teachers.

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