THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GENERATION C

Korinna Csetényi

(Dr. Korinna Csetényi, associate professor of the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures of SZTE JGYPK, e-mail address: korinnac@jgypk.szte.hu)

GENERATIONS

In my article, I am going to focus on the Information Age and the characteristics of Generation C. This generation is not defined on the basis of their age (as it happens in the case of more traditional designations, like generation X, Y or Z): its members belong due to their almost constant online presence and use of digital devices. Parents and educators cannot afford the luxury of ignoring this new reality, even if they choose not to be connected all the time.

Following a brief survey of the various types of generations, which are defined demographically, I would like to expand upon the differences between the online and offline worlds and those radical changes occurring in our behaviour and perception of the world caused by the development of information technology. I examine the digital lifestyle, online presence and the characteristics of online personality, and how the consequences of information overload can appear in relationships, interpersonal communications and within the learning environment.

Teachers always strive to create a learning environment free of conflict, using the most efficient methods and approaches to motivate students, especially teenagers, whose respect and trust are becoming harder to win, especially in the era of Information Technology. This era's characteristic features and technological advances cannot simply be disregarded; they have become an integral part of our lives, whether we like it or not: Information Technology has an effect upon our habits and changes communication channels, even influencing personal development. It has greatly contributed to increased levels of comfort: smartphone applications make life easier, whether used for staying in contact with friends and relatives from all over the world, navigation, or checking the weather forecast. However, there is also a downside to an excessive use of such devices, and their effect upon education and learning is of great concern.

As a starting point, it is useful to supply a list of the various generations. The dates should be viewed flexibly: slightly differing years as the beginning or the end of the given period might be found in the available literature.

"Baby boomers" are those people born between 1945 and 1964. They are followed by Generation X, born between 1965 and 1979, who are sometimes referred to as the MTV generation, because they were heavily influenced by the Music Television channel, which started broadcasting in 1981. The following generations are commonly referred to as digital generations: Y (1980–94), Z (1995–2010), and the youngest ones, born after 2010, called the Alpha.

Digital generations have shared their space with digital devices and social media from the earliest phase of their lives, and this has influenced their behaviour, feelings and way of thinking. Since they have grown up surrounded by these gadgets and have never known the pre-digital world, they are sometimes referred to as *digital natives,* while the previous generations (to which most of their parents and teachers belong) are the so-called *digital immigrants* (who are still learning how to use these devices). The latter grew up in a different, offline world, and were socialized in a different way and experienced "slow time", which had a particularly beneficial effect upon the maturation process (as opposed to today's accelerated speed of life).

For the digital generations, an online presence – which demands constant availability – is almost a given. The online environment is "a cultural, social environment" for them (Tari 2015: 177); one has to be "present" because this is almost dictated by group norms. If someone tries to resist this, it is like swimming against the current: s/he risks becoming an outsider or missing out on news and events, since most communication and information travel down this path nowadays. Today, even the words "talk" and "chat" have different connotations for teenagers, since they consider the messages exchanged via Messenger, Viber or mobile phones – which are all text-based – as a form of "talking".

PARENTS AND TEACHERS

Parents and teachers should attempt to be understanding, considerate, tolerant and open, instead of approaching young people with disdain, contempt, incomprehension or a sense of superiority. Certain situations might easily provoke the "back in my days" attitude, but this seldom leads to a constructive resolution of the given problem. Young people cannot be blamed for having been born into this age; they just use these new devices and take advantage of the opportunities provided by them.

Prohibiting them from using these gadgets (mobile phones, iPads), or demonizing these devices are no longer viable options. Setting a time limit for Internet access or computer use might be a solution with younger children who do not yet have a mobile phone and this would also show compromise on the part of the adult. In the case of teenagers, however, it is more advisable to emphasise the responsible use of technological devices, the importance of critical thinking and the development of critical filters – and this task is the duty of parents and educators.

One study advises a three-component model for healthy Internet use: balance, setting of boundaries and communication (Moreno 2015: 49). Finding a balance between the online and offline worlds is essential: children (and adults) should spend time with their friends in real life, hang out together, talk with them face-to-face instead of simply chatting and exchanging brief messages and emoticons via their digital devices. According to Moreno, teenagers who play computer games late into the night, even depriving themselves of sleep; who believe everything they read online, without ever questioning their truth value; who experience anxiety when they are without their smartphones or just by not being online (provoking the so-called FoMO reaction: fear of missing out), all exhibit symptoms of imbalance in their lives (Moreno 2015: 50). One explicit piece of advice given to parents is to set times that are off-limits for media use, eg. dinner time. The same can be implemented at schools: in fact, in many institutions, the phones are collected by the teacher in the morning and the children get their devices back only after the lessons.

As for the setting of boundaries, the second pillar in the model suggested by Moreno, sometimes children grasp this concept more easily if adults give them specific examples to make them understand why certain boundaries need to be respected and not transgressed. Simple questions might serve as a starting point for discussion: do you accept people who are complete strangers as friends on Facebook? What kind of photos or videos do you upload? Are you aware that it has become common practice for employers to check the prospective candidate's internet profiles before a job interview? Do you ever share private information (home address, telephone number, for example) on your profile? Do you ever deliberately look for inappropriate content? What do you know about privacy settings?

We, as parents and teachers, have already educated our children on the rules of appropriate, civilized behaviour in life. They need to understand that the same rules apply in the online world: you should not talk to strangers and you should treat people with respect and kindness (it is part of one's communal responsibility, for example, to report to an authority figure if someone is being cyberbullied).

The third pillar is open communication. Children should feel that they can always turn to responsible adults (parents, teachers or doctors). We should always be approachable and ready to help them, give them advice or just simply listen to them (they might feel bad about certain mean comments they received, or feel embarrassed because of some inappropriate content they might have come across involuntarily). Sincere conversations might trigger long conversations about Internet safe practice: we might, for example, take a look together at the profiles of other people, asking our child about his/her opinion of certain photos or comments, and whether the content posted on social media reflects truthfully the character of that person. If we succeed in implementing this model into our daily lives, it will go a long way towards guaranteeing safe and healthy Internet use.

ONLINE PERSONALITY

We should also examine the different characteristics of online existence. The so-called *online personality* is different from the *offline personality;* it is "more impulsive, impatient and vehement" (Tari 2015: 188). Studies have shown that people are apt to reveal more about themselves, even confidential information, when they are online (Moreno 2015: 115). Adults can also experience how easy it is to lose self-control while using the Internet: all too often, the exchange of messages and opinions, and the associated comments have but one purpose: to relieve tension. Even adults with strong, stable ego boundaries, a clear, firm sense of self, and of healthy self-esteem, might find it difficult to face certain content or to cope with negative feedback, anonymous attacks and critical remarks. It must be even harder for the vulnerable preteens and teenagers, who are still developing and who consider peer groups as the most defining factor in their lives.

Emotions are apt to be provoked more quickly in the online world, which is often used as a site for projection, where various "unconscious feelings and fantasies, desires and motivations" can appear (Tari 2011: 245). It is highly important to make upcoming generations understand that online behaviour has offline consequences. While parents might be happy that their child is not staying out, that s/he spends more time in the safe haven of home within the four walls of his/her room, they should be aware of the dangers of "wandering" in the online world. Many children become victims of bullying, fall prey to sexual predators, or stumble upon inappropriate content without having the adequate coping mechanisms or emotional apparatus to deal with these appropriately.[18]

ONLINE COMMUNICATION

As a result of the widespread use of communication devices and applications, people engage in social interactions and face-to-face situations less frequently. Although various platforms might create a sense of belonging, and are undoubtedly very effective, efficient and speedy means of information exchange and sharing (saving a lot of time and energy for everyone), a lot has been sacrificed on the altar of technology. The complete absence of meta-communication and substitution of emotional reactions with emoticons, make it more difficult to interpret or understand written texts (with a greater chance

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[18] Unfortunately, the rates of teenage depression, these days, are alarmingly high. Parents should take it seriously if their child is repeatedly posting negative comments (regarding his/her state of mind and feelings), on his/her Facebook, Twitter profiles because this might be a symptom of depression (Moreno 2015: 156).

of misunderstanding), and teenagers today are not very well-versed in and have fewer opportunities to practise real life social interactions. Schools and teachers might actually help in this regard: debating teams, discussion groups, role-playing and drama acting might turn the classroom into a place where students can practise interpersonal communication skills and dialogues, both individually and in groups.

EDUCATIONAL ISSUES

Next, I would like to turn my attention to certain issues directly connected to education. The Prussian educational system, the environment in which most parents and teachers were socialized in Hungary, does not seem appropriate these days. Students often do not show respect towards their elders and teachers, regardless of their age and experience (qualities which used to guarantee respect in the past). Teachers are no longer the authority figures they once were and sometimes even the home environment is complicit in this. The parent often derides the school's evaluation system or judgment (for example, in the case of a bad mark or a warning-letter from the headmaster), thus undermining the teacher's authority, and they are ready to attack the teachers, completely ignoring self-reflection and self-examination (upon to what extent the family environment might be responsible in a given situation).

Neglected teenagers, those who do not receive enough attention and quality time at home, are apt to commit such deeds at school with the sole purpose of provoking attention (e.g. disruptive behaviour, shouting, using swearwords during lessons). Unfortunately, parents often turn against the teacher and consider him/her an enemy instead of understanding that cooperation with the school and supporting its views would ultimately benefit the child. This does not necessarily mean better grades, but improvements in psychological well-being and the development and strengthening of the ego.

A change of perspective seems to be necessary: teachers should try to let go of old memories and habits, because most of those expectations will not be met (with only a few exceptions), thus creating a feeling of disappointment. An inflexible attitude will lead to frustration, a feeling of helplessness and a further widening of the generation gap. Shouting teachers, who lose patience, are not taken seriously by students, who might even ridicule them behind their backs. Winning the attention of these digital generations is not easy: they need to be motivated and teachers have to make them understand how learning can benefit them. Without proper motivation it is difficult to convince them why certain things need to be learnt, since almost any kind of information is at their disposal via the Internet.

In this regard, language teachers are in a special situation, since students often think of foreign languages as if they were not "real" subjects. They consider languages as necessary tools: scholarships, educational grants and working abroad are all real possibilities for them – if you speak the language. Owing to their interest in films, music and sports, students are constantly exposed to foreign languages (primarily English), so the classroom environment might not even be the main place where they meet it.

Teachers and parents should try to be well-informed and up-to-date in the teenagers' milieu. It is a good idea to know what they are interested in: their favourite TV shows, YouTube stars, sportsperson, singers or actors they follow on Twitter or Instagram. Having a common frame of reference helps in the building of connections and bonding, in making teenagers feel that the adult approaches them and their world with under-standing and curiosity, not contempt. If they see adults taking steps towards them, they might later be more receptive, open and accepting when we want to show them something from the "old" world.

Since teenagers are used to a constant flow of information, living in the stimulus-rich world of images, pop-up windows, flashing advertisements and hyperlinks, which all strive to catch and then disperse their attention, frontal teaching and black letters on white paper are just "killing" them. Language classes are more flexible compared to other subjects. The teacher can utilize new, digital possibilities or can play the students short videos (maybe connected to current world affairs), which prompt discussions about contemporary society, so the students can feel that the lesson is connected to the real world.

The digital era, unfortunately, brought about a decrease in attention span. One reason for this is the constant flood of information and stimuli, and a consequent increase in digital consumption. Staying focused on one task has become something of a challenge for these generations. If the teacher switches between different types of exercises, makes a joke or tells an anecdote, or plays them a song (as a gap-filling exercise), these techniques can help maintain attention. Shorter tasks will engage the students' attention better than the monotonous job of copying long lists of unknown words into their vocabulary books, or practising new grammar with structure drills. Teachers should attempt to integrate the online world into the lesson, and use the digital devices constructively.

Students should also be given a chance to show what they are good at since this gives them a sense of satisfaction and success, even through something as simple as helping the teacher to connect various IT devices. Most students are more skilled and knowledgeable in this regard (for example, when the classroom audio equipment failed during one of my lessons, a student resolved the problem by connecting his own portable loudspeaker to his phone). Teachers should also try to involve students in the decision-making process, for example, by choosing a film, a book or a topic together for later discussion.

Students are usually receptive to cooperative learning and lessons relying on this methodology have many benefits (improvement in group cohesion, classroom atmosphere and empathy) so, for the sake of project work, groups should be established. Classroom management is admittedly not easy and requires effort and energy, but it is worthwhile. Students prefer creative tasks involving group work to traditional tasks. This way, they can also practise interpersonal communication and cooperation.

One more aspect worth mentioning is connected to the personality of the teacher: if he/she finds joy in teaching, in imparting his/her knowledge (Tari 2011: 317), students feel this and it works as an incentive. As one student remarked in his course evaluation at the end of the term: "your enthusiasm is really catchy and it is a very good feeling". Teenagers need positive experiences and the school environment and the classroom can provide such opportunities, which, in turn, have beneficial effects upon personality development.

We are living in a new world and there is no turning back: teachers have to adapt to the changing circumstances if their goal is the optimization of the learning environment. This requires flexibility, patience and conscious attention (Tari 2011: 342). We should always keep in mind that the most important supporters of teenagers are adults – even in the Information Age (Tari 2015: 18).

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