

## Research Article

# The impact of 'Generation Y' occupational therapy students on practice education

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**Background/aim:** Many occupational therapy students can be classified as 'Generation Y', a group whose characteristics are perceived as being confident, optimistic and 'techno-savvy'. This study aimed to explore practice educator perceptions of 'Generation Y' students.

**Methods:** A questionnaire survey was sent to all practice educators affiliated with the university. The survey contained fixed choice questions on demographics and educators' knowledge of the term 'Generation Y', followed by open-ended questions on practice educator perceptions of occupational therapy 'Generation Y' students and the educational strategies used in practice education.

**Results:** Anonymous responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, attribute coding and content analysis. Most educators considered that there was, in fact, a 'Generation Y student', describing them as confident with technology, over confident in their skill level and easily bored. Practice educators raised concerns regarding students' casual communication, poor professional behaviour, shallow professional reasoning and difficulty when receiving negative feedback.

**Conclusions:** Overall, the results of this study suggest that 'Generation Y' students are having both a negative and a positive impact on practice education in occupational therapy. For educators, management of the overconfident student and professional reasoning development should be addressed in university practice education work-

shops. For students, the need for clarification of placement expectations on professional behaviour and communication was indicated. Students may also require 'listening to feedback' skill development prior to practice education. Universities and practice educators should consider the development of technological resources for practice education, including simulation, to meet the needs of the, now recognised 'Generation Y' student.

**KEY WORDS** fieldwork, millennials, placement, supervisors.

## Introduction

The Generation in which one is born has significant influence on individual social values, reflecting the social changes which occurred during their formative years and these are called generational characteristics. 'Generation Y', those born in the 1980's are purported to be 'techno-savvy', consumerist and self-absorbed. Most occupational therapy students and many younger practice educators are 'Generation Y'. In the workforce, generations include 'Baby Boomers' (born 1945–1959), 'Generation X' (born in the 1960's–1970's) and 'Generation Y'. The defining birth years of 'Generation Y' varies from 1977 to 1984. For this study, a 'Generation Y' student was defined as being born between 1980 and 1994.

'Generation Y's formative years included an explosion of accessible technology, computers, the Internet, mobile phones along with computer games, hence the 'techno-savvy' label and names such as the 'Millennials', the 'Internet Generation' or the 'Digital Generation' (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Raines, 2002; Tapscott, 2009). Alternative labels include the 'Sunshine Generation' and 'Generation Me' reflecting societal influences during this generation's formative years (Huntley, 2006; Raines, 2002; Twenge, 2006). This last descriptor refers to a societal cultural shift towards parenthood as a choice. Abortion was legalised, birth control was effective and safe, and according to the American researcher Twenge (2006), this resulted in 'Generation Y' being the most wanted, precious generation of children. Furthermore, this author also suggests that parents and educationalists used constant praise and encouragement to this generation, reinforcing their

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Accepted for publication 27 October 2011.

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strengths and building high self-esteem. Consequentially, 'Generation Y' is said to be self-absorbed and self-important but also a confident generation (Twenge, 2009).

The label 'Sunshine Generation' is believed to symbolise 'Generation Y's most positive characteristic, their optimism, as they have grown up in prosperous times. Other reported attributes of this generation include being multi-taskers, sociable, talented, well-educated, collaborative, open-minded, influential, and achievement-oriented (Raines, 2002). Further descriptors by Huntley (2006) include being idealistic, empowered, ambitious, committed and passionate. Conversely, 'Generation Y' are criticised for being materialistic, smart-talking, brash, self-entitled, self-absorbed, with an overdose of self-esteem (Patterson, 2007).

However, it could be argued that many of these descriptors refer to youth of all generations, especially those raised in affluent developed countries. Furthermore, as many social commentators are American or Australian, this phenomenon may be unique to these continents and therefore be culturally specific, undermining a global 'Generation Y' stereotype. On the other hand, these characteristics are impacting on undergraduate education in Australia with an increasing reference to 'a typical Gen. Y student'. The literature suggests that this group has different learning styles and expectations of education from previous generations (Sandars & Morrison, 2007; Twenge, 2009). These authors suggest that due to their social networking habits, students prefer to work in groups as they regard their peers as an important learning resource. Arhin (2009), for example, has stated that 'Generation Y' students are easily bored, with short attention spans.

Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) suggest that students also prefer the Internet as their main learning resource and seem reluctant to read a text. Educationalists write that 'Generation Y' prefer hands on experiential activities rather than routine or mundane tasks (Oblinger & Hawkins, 2005). While they can be self-directed learners, they also desire the maximum result, which often means being goal orientated and assessment driven (Wood, Baghurst, Waugh & Lancaster, 2008). Although these students want immediate feedback, they are also known to have difficulty accepting criticism (Provitiera McGlynn, 2008; Twenge, 2006). Students are respectful of authority, and yet do not hesitate to challenge it. For 'Generation Y', respect needs to be earned and is not granted just because of title or rank (Walker, 2006). However, 'Generation Y' students do have different technological skills and experience at their disposal than their predecessors (Sandars & Morrison, 2007). Students, for example, are observed using mobile technologies in lectures; some educationalists consider this disrespectful whereas others acknowledge students' preference for immediate accessible information. The students of this generation are also in paid employment in addition to their studies, with two-thirds working 11–15 hours/week (Australasian Survey of Student Engagement,

2007). It is suggested that they tend to be more committed to their social and work commitments than their university programmes.

As a consequence of these emerging characteristics, educationalists have responded with changes in educational approaches moving from linear to multimedia education methods, including online learning, audio/visual recorded lectures, blogs and Wikis, having e-books and assignments using technology, for example, participation in online discussion boards. Further responses included a more personalised approach to learning with choice in when and where to learn, choice in assessment topics and the creation of e-portfolios. The 'Student Experience' is now paramount in most universities.

Although these changes are being experienced in tertiary education, for occupational therapy students, practice education is an integral part of their learning environment. This crucial curriculum component promotes professional competence, confidence and identity and prepares students for the workplace (Alsop & Ryan, 1996; McAllister, Paterson, Higgs & Bithell, 2010). Thus, the role of the practice educator is crucial to the success of student education (Bonello, 2001; Kirke, Layton & Sim, 2007). For a practice educator, having a student is often additional to their normal workload, with their prime focus on clients/patients and not the students' learning preferences. Changes in university learning approaches therefore would not be easily imported into practice education.

From the occupational therapy literature, three authors have discussed 'Generation Y'. Gray (2008), in a British editorial, confronted practice educators by asking them if they were ready for the 'challenge' of having 'Generation Y' students. The author predicted that without educational changes to accommodate the students' new ways of learning, the value of placements within the curriculum would start to be questioned. Kowalski (2010) described a meeting with practice educators in the USA. The issues discussed included the lack of technical knowledge of practice educators and the student who is consistently late. These comments echoed informal responses from practice educators in Australian practice education workshops held in university settings. The participants reported that they find practice education to be more challenging with a marked change in student attitude. In a viewpoint article from Canada, Boudreau (2009) described generational attitudes and learning styles in an attempt to understand and respect them. These articles indicate the existence of issues in occupational therapy practice education regarding the 'Generation Y' student. Despite this fact, research on the topic of 'Generation Y' and their impact on practice education does not appear to have been undertaken. Therefore, the aims of this study were to explore practice educators' perceptions of 'Generation Y' students, and to investigate how these differences are currently being managed in practice.

## Methods

### Design

A survey was chosen as this method is known to be reasonably accurate, un-intrusive, and cost effective (Smith, Adachi, Mihashi, Kawano & Ishitake, 2006; Smith, Wei, Zhao & Wang, 2005). Furthermore, a survey method has been used in a similar study researching practice educator perspectives (Thomas *et al.*, 2007). According to Fink (2009, p. 1), surveys can 'describe, compare or explain individual and societal knowledge, feelings, values, preferences, and behaviour'. A survey instrument was developed based on the literature and social commentary on 'Generation Y'. The survey was divided into four sections, namely:

#### *Section 1: Demographic information*

This included a series of fixed choice questions on practice educator demographics including gender, age, qualification, area of practice, and number of students taken in the past five years. Age was included to ascertain if the respondent could be classified as 'Generation Y'.

#### *Section 2: Knowledge of the 'Generation Y' phenomenon*

This section included fixed answer questions on practice educator familiarity with the term 'Generation Y' and practice educator views on whether there is a 'Generation Y' occupational therapy student.

#### *Section 3: Characteristics of 'Generation Y'*

This section included a list of 'Generation Y' characteristics created from the literature. Practice educators were asked to choose multiple characteristics of their perception of a 'Generation Y' occupational therapy student. This list was followed by four open-ended questions on practice educator views on the most common positive/negative attributes that 'Generation Y' students have brought to practice education and to the profession.

#### *Section 4: Educating the 'Generation Y' student in practice*

This section included three open-ended questions. The first three asked the practice educator views on successful education strategies they have used and their main challenges educating these students. The fourth question asked what they believe 'Generation Y' students offer the future of the profession. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Newcastle, Australia.

### Participants

Participants included all 200 occupational therapy practice educators listed on the university database in 2009, being either current or previous educators of occupational therapy students. This was purposeful

sampling as participants were invited from known contacts. The anonymous survey was posted as a hard copy to all participants with a return stamped, addressed envelope.

### Data analysis

Fixed choice answers were analysed using descriptive statistics. Responses from the open-ended question were attribute-coded into two groups: (i) those under 30 years 'Generation Y' respondents and; (ii) those over 30 years Generation X and Baby Boomers respondents, known in this study as 'Older Generation' educators.

For the first cycle coding (Saldana, 2009), each response was examined with the intention of developing a range of categories representing the occupational therapy practice educator perceptions and management of 'Generation Y' occupational therapy students. In developing these categories, it was ensured that: (i) each category was mutually exclusive, so that a single response could be coded into one category only; and (ii) all responses could be coded into a category.

Second cycle coding included forming patterns and, subsequently, contrast coding between the younger and older groups. To ensure the validity of the categories in representing the perceptions of occupational therapy practice educators, all responses were reviewed and coded by at least two authors and subsequently compared. This coding resulted in six themes.

## Results

### Section 1: Respondent demographics

Of the 200 questionnaires sent out, 62 (31%) were returned. Of these, 91% respondents were female. Thirty five percent were classified as 'Generation Y'. Qualifications held by respondents included Diploma (5%), Bachelor of Science (69%), Bachelor of Science with Honours (19%), Masters (5%) and 2% of respondents indicated 'other'. Nearly all respondents (94%) had graduated from an Australian University. Respondents had practised as therapists 0–5 years (21%), 6–10 years (31%) and the remaining for over 10 years. Respondents identified themselves as being a generalist practitioner (34%), specialist practitioner (56%) and expert practitioner (10%).

### Section 2: Knowledge of the 'Generation Y' phenomenon

Most respondents reported they were very familiar (56%) or familiar (46%) with the term 'Generation Y'. Three percent of respondents were not familiar with the term 'Generation Y'. Most respondents (70%) reported they did consider there is a "stereotypical 'Generation Y' occupational therapy student". Twenty-three percent of respondents did not know and 5% reported no, they did not consider that there is a "stereotypical 'Generation Y' student".

### Section 3: Characteristics of a 'typical' 'Generation Y' occupational therapy student

Respondents reported a range of characteristics which they considered described a typical 'Generation Y' occupational therapy student (Table 1).

### Section 4: Educating the 'Generation Y' student in practise

Six themes were generated from the open-ended questions in this section. Not all questions were answered by all respondents. The 'Generation Y' educator responses were differentiated from 'Older Generation' educators.

*Theme one: 'Students are often overconfident and therefore not always open to feedback'*

Both generations of educators felt that student skill and knowledge does not always match their confidence. Some reported that this can sometimes be interpreted as arrogance, lacking empathy and client centeredness. In giving feedback, students can be quick to question and can become defensive if criticised, making excuses for their behaviour. Some interpreted this as a lack of respect for supervisors. For example: *Often overconfident with skill*

TABLE 1: Characteristics that describe a typical Generation 'Y' occupational therapy student

Characteristics	Proportion of responses (%)
Is confident with technology	82
Uses the Internet as their main learning resource	67
Prefers 'doing' rather than theory	54
Keeps in touch with friends and family at work via text, phone and email	49
Is willing and helpful to staff and clients	48
Likes immediate feedback	43
Does not enjoy routine or mundane tasks	41
Is easily bored	39
Is a self-directed learner	39
Has difficulty accepting criticism	36
Does the minimum work to pass	28
Is goal orientated	26
Has short attention span	25
Doesn't read information given	25
Is a multi-tasker	23
Is hopeful/optimistic	23
Is team orientated	23
Likes discovery learning	20
Prefers fun activities	20
More committed to social activities rather than work	20

*level and doesn't ask for assistance if unsure (Respondent 33, 'Older Generation').*

A few of the 'Older Generation' educators proposed that student overconfidence is a positive attribute using youth, enthusiasm and optimism as descriptors. Some 'Generation Y' educators concurred proposing that this confidence will result in students being strong advocates for the profession and even pioneers for the future. For example: *Willing to embrace non-traditional and diverse areas of practice as Occupational Therapists and are not intimidated by traditional medical hierarchy (Respondent 38, 'Older Generation').*

Some strategies for managing these issues included providing feedback in a positive manner. For example: *This is what I want to see from you in the next few days rather than (saying) this is what you haven't been doing (Respondent 37, 'Older Generation').*

*Theme two: 'Students often lack clinical reasoning and process in a rush to get to the end point'*

Many 'Older Generation' educators reported that students have a 'skimming approach' to screening and analysing files. They thought this makes them less aware of the patient's situation and consequentially less empathetic. They suggested that this lack of depth occurred as students did not apply themselves unless they are marked or have personal gain or were being assessed. Some educators even suggested that the students perceived their experience on placement as more important than the patient with little consideration for the supervisor. For example: *Under appreciation of the practical experience. At times lack of interest in developing knowledge and skills more deeply (Respondent 30, 'Older Generation').*

All age group respondents suggested that short constant feedback was the most effective strategy to manage these issues. 'Generation Y' respondents suggested using experiential, self-directed and problem-based learning to help the student find the answer rather allowing them to always ask for help. For example: *Engaging students, convincing them to demonstrate attention to detail to produce quality work. Coaching students to modify behaviours. Committing the time required to mentor students to optimal success/outcome (Respondent 14, 'Older Generation') and 'Hands on'. But need to encourage clinical reasoning and participation in 'non-direct' patient activities (Respondent 31, 'Older Generation').*

*Theme three: 'Students get bored easily and are 'doers' rather than observers'*

'Older Generation' educators suggested that students can appear disinterested, bored, lack initiative and wait for constant stimulation from their supervisor. One suggested that students need to be 'constantly entertained'. Both generations reported that students do not like routine or mundane tasks, particularly administrative tasks, but need to 'do' interesting tasks. For example: Direct quote from a typical student after being with patients on

the cancer ward when asked 'how was your morning?' – reply 'nothing exciting'. (Respondent 22, 'Older Generation').

Both generations reported that immediate feedback is effective management strategy. 'Older Generation' respondents suggested that other potentially effective education strategies might include focus on face to face instruction with clear direction and structure, for example, projects, to-do lists and timetables. The 'Generation Y' educators concurred that keeping tasks practical is an appropriate strategy; however, they also added that more time for reading/research/study should also be integrated and considered.

*Theme four: 'Students are progressive and will not be phased by the overload of IT issues'*

Both generations report that students are confident with technology and these new learning methods can be transferred to the patient/client therapeutic relationship, but there was frustration with the use of mobile phones. 'Older Generation' educators perceived this use of technology as enabling students to keep up to date with practice issues in addition to learning new systems quickly. For example: *Will adapt to more and more computer-based documentation, will engage in research/ongoing education of self and others more readily due to ease of Internet etc.* (Respondent 13, 'Older Generation').

'Older Generation' educators did not suggest different education strategies; however, 'Generation Y' respondents suggested use of more technology in practice education. For example: *Show YouTube videos and Internet resources of patients doing functional tasks for example, transfer from bed-wheelchair* (Respondent 10, Generation Y).

*Theme five: 'Different Communication style: can tend to be casual or lacking in what (Generation X) think is appropriate professionalism'*

Some 'Older Generation' educators viewed students' communication to staff and patients as overly casual and familiar, often perceived as lacking respect. Some also reported documentation as having poor spelling/grammar and using text language. One educator reported that they talk too much 'irrelevant jibber'. Some 'Generation Y' educators agreed stating that they must set clear professional boundaries, for example: *Being Gen. Y myself – I have to avoid letting students get too relaxed – I often worry that I will let them become too casual* (Respondent 6, Generation Y). Other 'Generation Y' educators reported good communication skills, especially team working and social interaction with colleagues.

*Theme six: 'Don't believe that students are all that different from other generations'*

While there were fewer respondents than others in this theme, some 'Older Generation' respondents did not perceive differences between the generations of students they have educated. They suggested that all students

have had one or more 'Generation Y' characteristic and that they have not changed their teaching and learning strategies for 'Generation Y' students. One 'Generation Y' educator stated that: *I do not feel that all those who happen to be of a certain age are similar in the above areas. Very difficult to generalise* (Respondent 7, Generation Y).

## Discussion

This survey provides relevant insights into practice educator views of occupational therapy 'Generation Y' students and the issues encountered when educating them in practice settings. Although the response rate was not as high as it could have been, it was comparable to a similar study of practice educators views using a university database (Thomas *et al.*, 2007). Overall, the findings indicate that practice educators did perceive that there was a 'Generation Y' occupational therapy student.

It could be argued that some of the characteristics reported are attributes of youth in all generations but with no research to compare 'Older Generations', when they were young, this argument cannot be explored, although it is upheld by some educators based on their experience across decades. Furthermore, as most respondents were familiar with the term 'Generation Y', the effect of the media in stereotyping the generational argument cannot be ignored and may have influenced the educators' views. According to some American research, evidence is mounting that there are 'Generation Y' differences, therefore it is important to understand them as they may affect practice education (Twenge, 2009).

The themes identified in this research relate strongly to the social commentary on 'Generation Y', who report a confident, assertive, technologically competent generation who are bored easily (Huntley, 2006; Twenge, 2006). The theme of overconfidence and not listening to feedback is reported in the literature as being a result of parenting and education known as 'praise-for-anything feedback'. According to Nimon (2007), this has led to a generation that confuses input (what they do) with output (what they achieve). In a study of 353 American college students, for example, it was found that one-third of students believed they should get good grades just for attending classes (Greenberger, Lessard, Chen & Farrugia, 2008). Twenge (2009) researched changes in narcissistic traits in undergraduate students in the USA between 1982 and 2006 and found a marked increase in overconfidence, self-centeredness, and lack of empathy. The author concluded that this student overconfidence may need to be tempered and recommended that students be given very specific instructions, frequent feedback, and explicit rules. These are strategies identified by the educators in this research. However, Oblinger (2003) attributes students not accepting negative feedback to 'Generation Y' bringing 'customer service expectations' to the institutions they attend.

To accommodate students who are easily bored, Twenge (2009) proposed that instruction may need to be delivered in shorter segments and perhaps incorporate more material delivered in media such as DVDs and other interactive formats. 'Generation Y' practice educators suggested interactive media as an effective strategy. In practice, as an educators' primary role is to focus on the client, the development of such interactive tools and new strategies is a role for the university programmes to consider.

In addition to overconfidence, respondents highlighted the issue of competence with concerns that 'Generation Y' students are skimming work and therefore professional reasoning. Recently in Canada, Holmes *et al.* (2010) analysed 400 occupational therapy students finding that competence was mainly achieved in the final placement and even so, some students fell short in their competence on clinical reasoning. Derald, Olson, Janzen and Warren (2002) researched occupational therapy student confidence in practice education and noted that competence (performance) and confidence (as a self-assessed belief or feeling about one's self) are two different concepts, though closely related. However, the most critical need for developing competent professionals is for students to develop the capacity to judge their own competence and learning needs in addition to the ability to plan how their needs can be met (Tan, 2008).

As 'Generation Y' seems to appreciate directness (Twenge, 2006), clear feedback to students on their performance, reasoning and overconfidence is required to enable students to set realistic learning goals. Nevertheless, as a result of the positive reinforcement and self-esteem building they received from their parents, it is reasonable to assume that the majority may need help with accepting criticism and managing conflict (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). Twenge (2009) asserts that universities should also educate students that it is better to admit a lack of knowledge than to seem falsely competent concluding that this would enable students to learn appropriate professional behaviour.

Professional behaviour and poor attitude were a concern for practice educators. Twenge (2006) reports 'Generation Y' will talk to their elders the same way as they talk to their friends, lacking in social etiquette and will 'disrespect authority'. This research suggests this may be the case. It could be argued that in health care, there has been a shift to a more casual attitude over the years, with flattening of hierarchal structures including more casual uniforms, and, as such, the younger generation are part of a transition to a more casual working style. Although this argument may be explanatory, it may not be satisfactory. Rogers and Ballantyne (2010), in their research on medical students' behaviours and subsequent Medical Board complaints, found that there was a link between adverse student behaviour and disciplinary action at the practitioner level. It is imperative therefore that it is made clear what is acceptable communication and professional

behaviour and, if that standard has changed in practice over time, or if it differs in practice settings, students are clear on what is acceptable and what is not. Skingley, Arnott, Greaves and Nabb (2007) in the UK looked at failing nursing students in practice education and found that professional behaviour was a concern for educators. The authors recommended that behavioural standards be written in language which students and educators can clearly understand. This may also be a role for universities in partnership with educators, to define professional communication and behaviour in a more explanatory and explicit manner for student clarity.

In this study, practice educators positively acknowledged the technology skills of 'Generation Y' students in both existing practice, for example, computer-based records and in teaching and learning. However, student skill and technology use does vary. Recent research in three Australian Universities found four levels of technology use with 'basic users' representing 45% of the sample, as they were infrequent users of new and emerging technologies (Kennedy, Judd, Dalgarno & Waycott, 2010). The correlation between computer skills and use of emerging computer technologies remains unclear.

An important emerging technology for developing practice skills in occupational therapy is simulation. Simulation involves engaging the student in an experience designed to produce particular scenarios or responses (Merryman, 2010). It has been used for practice education preparation (Brown & Williams, 2009) and debriefing (Merryman, 2010), in addition to developing knowledge and clinical reasoning using DVDs (Williams, Brown, Scholes, French & Archer, 2010) and interactive video (Tomlin, 2005). The question remains whether simulation can replace parts of practice education, or be an essential part of preparation for real clinical experiences for students. Gray (2008) challenged the occupational therapy profession to recognise that many traditional practice education methods are now outdated. The author proposed that change is rapid and continuous and, in not using new technologies, we are failing to support students in adapting to the 21st century, and, as technology is part of practice, this challenge cannot be ignored.

### Further research

Further and more detailed research of 'Generation Y' students and occupational therapy is required specifically on technology use, preferred teaching and learning strategies in practice education and preferred characteristics of effective practice educators. This will elucidate and inform educators on effective teaching methods when educating students in practice education in the 21st century.

### Limitations of the study

There are certain limitations of this study that should be acknowledged. The sample size was limited to educators on the database of The University of Newcastle, Australia

and therefore some selection bias may have been present. The response rate and non-response bias may also be potential limitations. On the other hand, this study did target all practice educators from the University of Newcastle and we are confident that the findings are representative and relevant to the profession. Nevertheless, due to local sample, the results may not be generalised within Australia or internationally.

## Conclusion

Overall, this research suggests that most occupational therapy practice educators do consider that there is, in fact, a 'Generation Y' occupational therapy student. Practice educators reported concerns when educating these students regarding communication, professional behaviour, depth of professional reasoning and receiving feedback. These results raise awareness, discussion and debate on issues experienced by practice educators. Regardless of the 'Generation Y' label, there is a responsibility for education providers of occupational therapy programs to work more closely with students and practice educators to address these concerns in a more explicit manner both in practice education preparation and in the creative development of interactive tools including simulation for student competency development.

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