Instructors need to take steps to make the online classroom a comfortable and supportive learning environment regardless of students’ online learning experience or learning style preferences—a particularly important consideration when teaching students from multiple generations.

Deborah Silverman, assistant professor of human nutrition and dietetics at Eastern Michigan University, teaches online and hybrid courses and has observed several generational differences among her students, some of which are due to the level of familiarity with the technology as well as their previous learning experiences. Among these differences,

- older students tend to resist technology more than younger students,
- older students are more likely to ask the instructor technical questions rather than relying on the helpdesk,
- younger students are more likely to include URLs in threaded discussions, and
- younger students tend to prefer video.

For many young students, the idea of taking an online course is nothing new. They are often comfortable with the technology as well as the student-centered learning environment. For older students, the technology and the pedagogy are obstacles. Many older students are used to a traditional, lecture-based learning environment and reluctantly enroll in online courses only when there are no other viable options.

“There are some students who should never be in the online environment. It’s sad because it’s often because of how they have been taught face to face. They’re spoon-fed learners who are not [inclined] to become self-directed learners. That disturbs me because I’m in a profession where we’re training practitioners who are going to have to take courses to maintain their credentials once they graduate. Most of the courses in our profession are being offered in an online format, and if they aren’t happy using technology, they’re going to have a difficult time finding ways to be able to earn the number of continuing education hours they need,” Silverman says.

Whenever Silverman has a new group of learners, she has them do a learning styles assessment. In addition to finding out how students prefer to learn, the assessment also indicates whether or not they know things such as how to upload and download documents. “When I’ve got a mixed age group, I put in several different options. They have the option to read the textbook or view a video of the content. They can do the textbook reading and have some supplementary video clips that help to reinforce the learning,” Silverman says.
When assigning group work to multigenerational group of learners, Silverman makes it a point to group students with similar learning styles and experiences so that they are initially comfortable. As the course progresses, Silverman lets students choose their own groups.

There are many benefits to getting students from different generations to interact with each other regarding the course content. However, different cultural references and language usage can be obstacles. Silverman, a member of the baby boom generation, feels that it is important for her to keep up-to-date on the ways that her younger students interact and to be able to provide cultural references that they can relate to. However, she reminds her younger students to use standard language in the course rather than the shorthand that is so common among people who grew up using informal text messaging.

“I think there’s going to be some challenges for faculty to understand the differences across generations, and we have the responsibility to find ways to adapt our delivery and engage our students or we’re always going to have this core of students who are not going to be happy,” Silverman says.

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