

Millennials: the age of entitlement

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"I'm so lost! Your course is so confusing. Like, I really have no idea what to do and, like, I'm ready to simply cry and, like, drop this crazy course."

Susie, a major in education, blinked, but no tears came; she just kept glaring at me with her elaborately made-up brown eyes. She had texted me the previous day about how stressed she was about my course, and I had invited her to come to my office at her leisure. But this wasn't a great start to our heart-to-heart.

Of course, I felt terrible; tears even came to my eyes. "Susie," I said, "you are a wonderful student. You're bright and ambitious and doing the work; what can I do to help you?"

"Well, I can't do the work," she responded. "This lesson plan format is stupid, and the lexical assignment doesn't make sense; I don't know what you mean when you say 'analyse a lexical item'. What does *lexical* mean, anyway?"

My first thought was to ask her if she had any idea how to use a dictionary, but I restrained myself from showing anything but compassion.

"Susie," I said, "*lexical* means *word*, or *vocabulary*. Did you read the directions?"

She hedged. “Everything is so confusing, what exactly do you want me to do? I don’t know what *analyse a grammatical item* means, or, like, what is a *function word*...Like, this is all too hard, and the lesson plan, it’s insane: like, really disorganised.”

I took a deep breath and walked Susie through both assignments, apologising for her confusion. At the end of the meeting I promised that I’d look at the instructions again. “Send me an email with what you think will make it easier to comprehend,” I said.

She nodded, but I knew I’d get no email. Susie was taking my online course but she never came to the optional face-to-face study sessions that I had organised – at the cost of a lot of extra work for me – because I wanted everyone to succeed. She told me she didn’t have the time or the inclination to show up.

Like so many of my students, Susie takes 18-21 credit hours per semester because it costs the same as taking 12-21 hours. She hopes to graduate with the least possible debt. But students that take this approach often end up cramming too much coursework into a schedule that also includes doing up to 40 hours of paid work a week – not to mention the millennial’s obligatory three hours a day of Netflix and a similar number for social media and going out with friends. Overloaded and stressed, these students cannot focus on their academic tasks.

Nor do they see the point of doing so. American millennials do not view college as a place to learn; rather, they see it as a place to get a kind of “I’m certified and intelligent” tattoo that entitles them to start their professional pursuit of the American Dream – and start paying off the \$140,000 of debt that I’ve known some MA and PhD students to get into.

But if millennial students feel cheated when they are asked to knuckle down in the library, I feel cheated by having to ask them. I spent a decade of my late life preparing for a job that I thought would involve training people to think. Yet I soon realised that this is not what is expected of me at all. The modern American academic’s unspoken job description is to keep students on their courses and to make sure they graduate – whether they learn anything or not. The modern university is a factory, not a greenhouse.

This fact is underlined at every faculty meeting of my Midwestern public research university. Our dean booms: “Enrolment is down 20 per cent, folks; if you want our college to survive, make sure you join the voluntary Saturday recruitment drives!” A committee I attend just decided to lower the required high-school GPA for admission again, and to offer students the option of video interviews instead of face-to-face.

This suits the academics, too. Many tenured professors are unwilling to give their time to chaperone visiting students around the college and we can’t ask the far more numerous adjuncts to do so because while their precarious employment conditions make them less likely to complain, the fact that they are paid by the course gives them no incentive to sit on committees or participate in recruitment drives.

That leaves non-tenure track staff like me to both pull the cart and shovel out the stalls.

Students suffer in this system, too. Take Louis, a handsome young black man in his mid-twenties, who comes to class wearing a black bandanna and leather jacket. He has such a sweet aura and regularly reiterates, in his soft voice, that he wants to be a teacher and work in inner-city schools: his neighbourhood. He listens when I talk, and thinks before he responds. But he is near to failing my course because he doesn't do the work. Why? He has a small moving company and drives all over the state, hauling furniture and moving folks. He works whenever he gets a gig; he has to eat and pay tuition. He's so busy this semester that he doesn't have time to show up for anything, much less office hours.

Then there is Yusef. My colleagues like him because he is jovial, brings them small gifts and shows up for most of their classes. Yusef is a Saudi man in his early thirties, with a wife and kids here in town. And he is ambitious. The work he sends me in video format is definitely his, but the text assignments he submits are sophisticated and error-free, and are definitely not his.

We all know that our college needs international students because they pay far more money than residents. No university wants any international student to leave since incoming enrolment from outside the US has drastically dropped owing to visa regulations and the ambience created by our current president. Yusef shows up for 10 minutes here and there, with a smile and a gift, and then takes off. In his culture, charm and small chunks of work are enough to gain a degree.

Then there is Stephen, a working literacy coach, always well-dressed, but puffed up with pride because he already has a good job and a wife who earns great money. Stephen was initially someone I looked forward to teaching; he was respectful, did the work and offered great questions. But when the time came for me to comment on his research paper draft, he went ballistic. He accused me of not knowing how to edit, of personally attacking his paper, and of singling him out because, as a professional, he made me feel threatened. His ire almost bowled me over when he came in for office hours.

I kept my cool and just asked him a series of questions. His answers led me to understand that no one had ever told Stephen that he was anything but a gifted, superior student. And why not – he was literate, upper middle class, white, male and studious. All through school he had behaved and listened and done whatever his teachers asked of him. Even in college, his instructors had not challenged him to move beyond his current levels of competency – because mediocre was safe and good enough. In my enthusiasm, my mistake had been to ask him to carefully revise and organise a paper so that its structure met my own academic standards.



There has been a lot of millennial-bashing in the news recently. There is also a lot in private, among faculty; my colleagues all report similar experiences to mine.

Some retort that my generation should get off its high horse and work harder to understand how much more difficult young people have it these days. And I've tried to portray some empathy and understanding. I know millennials' dilemma with tuition debt; I feel their pain. But it remains truly difficult for me to respect them as students, as potential scholars and as thinkers.

Another reason for this is Linda. A woman in her late fifties, Linda is what we call a late-life student. And she is phenomenal. She can read and follow directions. She has no trouble with anything, whether it be face-to-face interaction or online coursework. She likes the course design and workload. She even thanks me for every critique, and wants to discuss her work further. The ease with which she negotiates every assignment and required revision seems almost too good to be true given that she has never taken an online course before, lacks any prior training in linguistics and is a busy working mother and grandmother. I wonder if we share a kind of generationally kindred brain, and her performance makes me wonder even more why the millennials make such heavy weather of studying. They are used to online work; they are more tech-savvy than either Linda or myself is, and yet they are angry, frustrated and confused with my course and with me.

Tentatively, my conclusions focus on the millennial persona. To return to Susie, the blamer, complainer and shamer, she is training to be a teacher, yet she doesn't seem able to take responsibility for her own learning. She feels entitled, and she sees me as a service person: an academic clerk of sorts. Yes, I'm long in the tooth, but in my day I would never have

dreamed of requesting an office hour and blaming a professor because I did not understand terminology.

It was clear that Susie had not read the syllabus, or the assignment instructions; if anything, she had skimmed a few things in the module and then got frustrated and angry. But her emotional upset, in her mind, was valid, and, to relieve her anxiety and reassure herself, she shifted the burden of her inadequacy on to my tired shoulders. She used the magic words *I'm thinking of dropping your course* because she knew that every modern academic lives in fear of them.

To be honest, I shouldn't have accepted that burden. But I did – not merely out of fear of a slap on the wrists from my superiors but also because I don't like emotional outbursts; I hoped that, becalmed, Susie would go away and do some work – or at least just go away. Nor do I enjoy being thought of as a bad teacher. Most importantly, I don't like to give up on young people – especially those who are planning to be the future teachers. But it is terribly disheartening to meet the Susies of this world.

As for Louis, I'm at a loss. His attempt to juggle 40-plus hours of paid work with a full academic load is insanity in my eyes. I can accept his late submissions in the hope that he may ultimately turn in something that passes muster, but I can't help him balance his life, and I sense that he is playing me as a soft touch. Still, his case makes me sad: he is the one who suffers for his choices in the end, after all.

I've suggested that he apply for a Fulbright English teaching assistantship, so he can go abroad and see how others live. At least it would broaden his horizons. However, such awards require a clear demonstration of competence in expressing ideas in print. I'm not sure Louis will be able to rise to that challenge – especially after a long day of driving.

I know about that requirement because I, too, recently applied for a Fulbright award. I spent a lot of time teaching abroad in my previous career, and I just can't get used to US students' attitude. Stephen, in case you're wondering, got his A. His pride was restored. But my interactions with him only deepened my sense that his is a generation that I just can't teach.

Millennials don't read. They don't think as critically as they could. And they're not interested in learning for learning's sake. They want the Dream. They will go into debt to get that degree they believe will help them pursue it, but they have lost respect for knowledge, rigour and hard intellectual work. Working among such entitled puppies makes me feel like an academic platypus out of water.

Vieno Vehko is a pseudonymous assistant professor at a Midwestern university.