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Teaching Millennials: The Challenge of Ambiguity

Sheila M. Fisher
Trinity College, sheila.fisher@trincoll.edu

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You know how, when you're working on a paper or a project, at random you pick up a something to read, and all of a sudden, it seems to become, by some bizarre alchemy, a touchstone for your project? When I began thinking about this paper, I had just begun rereading, for no particularly good reason, Voltaire's *Candide*, which I hadn't been back to for many years. In Andre Maurois's "Appreciation" of *Candide* at the start of my edition, he writes: "It is certain that a system imbued with perfect clarity has few chances of being a truthful image of an obscure and mysterious world." [i] It struck me that this quotation could be an epigraph for a paper on the challenge of teaching ambiguity to millennial students. Any "truthful image of an obscure and mysterious world," assuming that there could be such a thing, would, almost by definition, have to be ambiguous.

But according to the many theories and theorizers about the Millennials, they are not particularly able to handle ambiguity. They don't like it. After all, the Millennials' salient traits, as we've been hearing about them today and as Wilson and Gerber define them, are these: they are **Sheltered, Confident, Team-Oriented, Achieving, Pressured, and Conventional.** (Also throw in **Optimistic**. In fact, the Millennial student, read a certain way, could be seen to have some kinship with Candide.) As a result, the teaching strategies that Wilson and Gerber propose as most effective with Millennials all boil down to a central feature: clarity.

Now, no one can deny that clarity is vital to excellent teaching, and I think we'd all agree that this is true for any generation. But there seems to be an underlying assumption that Millenials go beyond simply wanting clarity because it's a good thing. Rather, they positively need it, and they become stressed and distressed without it. I don't buy it. It doesn't ring true. My evidence? Well, right up front, I admit that my claim rests on the subjective evaluation based in 33 years' worth teaching college English courses. And on that basis, I'd like to argue this: not only can the Millennials handle ambiguity in ways our theorizations of them may elide. But further, there may actually be something about the Millennials that makes them more able to deal with it than other recent college generations. And maybe even better than we can.

Of course, my reasons for this impression may stem from the fact that my field is literature. Maurois's statement about the "system imbued with perfect clarity ha[ving] few chances of being a truthful image of an obscure and mysterious world" could also be a motto for literary studies. Words by their nature are multivalent and ambiguous. Their capacity for ambiguity is the stuff of which literature is made. It's also the stuff of which literary interpretation is made, as you might also be hearing in the next session from my colleague Ciarran Barry. To be honest, "perfect clarity" would put us literary critics out of business. We might, with good reason, be suspected of having a stake in cultivating in students an affinity for, or at least a comfort with, ambiguity. But our students, I believe, love literature because of, not despite its refusal to yield one clear and coherent meaning. Millennial students, in my experience, are no more averse than their predecessors to wrestling with multivalency in literature, because in this "obscure and mysterious world" of the text, students can find a space for themselves and for their own readings, opinions, and voices.

What exactly does this mean, and why is it significant? Well, if Millennials are sheltered and conventional, then, as they explore the ambiguities of the literary text, they are wandering into an uncharted territory. If they are team-oriented, then their wanderings, even if conducted within the community of the classroom, take them into territory they must ultimately map on their own. If they are conventional, then dealing with the possibilities that there are more than one answer and that some of the most satisfying answers may work outside the safety of conventions is a way of moving them beyond rules and constraints. In other words, insofar as we as educators define our jobs as helping the Millennials outgrow the somewhat restrictive traits we have discovered in or assigned to them, then reading literature, like sleep, fresh air, exercise, and organic vegetables, is good for them. We know that already. But I would argue for something more. Not just that reading literature is good for them. I'd argue that they embrace literature and its ambiguity because they are at ease with language, reading, and writing in ways that previous generations may not have been.

We frequently claim, to the extent that it's become a kind of truism, that students don't read as much as they should or as previous generations did, and that they don't have the discipline to write much or well. We've been claiming that before there were Millennials. But courtesy of technology, the Millennials may be the most textual generation in history. They may actually read and write to communicate with each other more than they talk. Indeed, it's not too much to say that they have reinvented the epistolary form and made it their own, even if it has emerged in the abbreviated spurts of textings and tweets. They are reading and writing constantly. Yes, I know – the spelling is awful, the grammar is worse, and the telegraphic nature of the messages augurs a day when no one will be able to pay attention to writing that is longer than 50 characters.

Nonetheless, Millennials live in a world of textual superfluity. Let's face it: we all do. But this is their world; it's their birthright; they have made it. And so they learn from an early age that there is a plethora (one of their favorite words, interestingly) of information out there. And as a result, they are keenly aware that knowledge is fragmented and fragmentary, and further, that there is no single consistent answer. Since this is the world they live in, one could say that it's no wonder they want clarity, with all these conflicting motes and messages swirling around them. But one could as easily argue that it's the shifting and swirl that create the very conditions for their ease with multiple meanings.

In order to test out my theory that Millennials are friends with ambiguity, I did something very scientific for an English professor. I felt I needed some data, so I asked the students in my advanced level course, "Women Writers of the Middle Ages," whether they felt their generation (they all know already that they're called Millennials) can handle ambiguity in the classroom and in life. I conducted my study in two ways: first, by devoting 20 minutes of class discussion to this question, and second, in the next class, by giving them 5 points on a 10-point quiz for their written responses to it.[ii] In advance, I told them that their oral and written responses would be included in my paper on just this topic, which I was writing for a whole conference on Millennials being presented at Trinity. Based on my scientifically significant sampling of my 14 students (10 women and 4 men representing fairly equal numbers of sophomores, juniors, and seniors), the results were these: **three** students said that, "No, Millennials could not effectively handle ambiguity either in the classroom or in life." **One** student said that, "Yes," Millennials could handle ambiguity in the classroom, but not in life. The other **ten** students said that, "Yes, Millennials by and large could handle ambiguity effectively."

This is a rather surprisingly disproportionate number of students who feel that their generation does quite well with ambiguity. Now it may be that these results are skewed for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that most of the folks in the class are English majors, and they're used to not getting definite answers to anything. What is more, my question could fairly be considered to be loaded, and, after all, they knew exactly why they were being asked this question by their professor; they knew the audience for the paper and the context in which it would be given. And it would not be surprising if they wanted to represent themselves as more nuanced and sophisticated than the professors analyzing them might at first blush assume. But even taking the faultiness of my method into account, what is especially telling here is the scope and breadth of their responses.

It will probably come as no surprise that the negative responses to the question were less interesting and thoughtful than the positive responses. And I don't think that's only because the students who said their generation didn't deal well with ambiguity themselves felt uneasy about it. The answers were less interesting because they sounded pat, as if the students were parroting back perceptions about their generation that they had heard from somewhere else. The reasons for their negative responses? With some predictability: their generation wants clarity; technology means they want and get instant gratification; they have no patience with looking for answers in books. The positive responses, on the other hand, were thoughtful and sometimes pretty surprising, as were certain turns in the class discussion that preceded the written responses on the quiz.

Some of the positive answers were fairly straightforward. "Yes," such students would offer. Their generation can deal with ambiguity because doing so is central to any kind of learning and because they know they should be working on grappling with it now because life

outside college will be filled with ambiguities. "Yes," another student replied. We can deal with it because "we're all smart enough to know black from white. There will always be some who want just one answer, [and] so this trait can't be said to characterize a whole generation." From there, the answers began to get more interesting, and more nuanced.

One student, a senior, wrote that he firmly believed his generation was quite comfortable with ambiguity. But then he went on to suggest how Millennials might, in fact, be too comfortable with it, or else use a seeming ease with it to suit their own purposes. He writes that sometimes the embrace of ambiguity is "just a front for intellectual laziness." And he continues: "[Saying that] the answer can be 'Yes and No' can really mean 'I'm not sure and I can't figure this out.' It can become a crutch." Nonetheless, this student believes that his peers can detect when someone is glomming on to the idea of ambiguity as a pseudo-sophisticated excuse not to engage in rigorous intellectual effort. And then, in arguably the most interesting turn of his response, he ends by writing: "But it is the generation who raised us that hates ambiguity in life because it's become so easy to avoid as parents: ('What are you doing tonight? Call me when you decide')." If, as this student suggests, the parents of Millennials are as overprotective and controlling as they've been claimed to be, then maybe, instead of conventionality, parents are inadvertently fostering a self-defining, if not downright rebellious affinity with the freedom posed by ambiguity.

In my class, another particularly interesting thread of responses, which emerged both in the written answers and in class discussion, involved religion, a topic they introduced into the discussion on their own, independent of my questions. In her written response, one sophomore student replied: "We want and get answers to factual questions fast, but we can't Google 'the meaning of life' or 'does God exist' and find definitive answers. Yet, because of human

curiosity, we still want to know about these other issues." In our class discussion, at least four

students said that they were convinced that people in their generation were actually more willing

to believe in God precisely because they were comfortable with ambiguity and didn't expect a

definitive or unitary answer to the question of whether God exists. These students believed

(rightly or wrongly, of course, is a matter of debate) that, as a result, they were uniquely

positioned both to believe in God without knowing the answer to God's existence and to live

with an ambiguity that was, in a certain respect, at the very heart of the experience of faith. They

said that one of the places on campus that most consistently and energetically engages questions

of ambiguity is the Chapel. And they believe that they themselves may well be more spiritual as

a result of their embrace of ambiguity than generations immediately prior to them.

Finally, the most extensive and thoughtful written response to my question came from a

senior, who, in the process, raised a number of issues about which I myself had been wondering

as I was planning this paper. He writes: "We are a generation that, like all others, seeks to define

things, but our capacity for multiplicity is greater than [that of] other [generations] because we

are essentially the children of queer theory, postcolonialism, poststructuralism. I obviously don't

mean that people are consciously aware or academically in pursuit of these concepts, but in a

general kind of way, the values are present in our culture in our ability to accept and understand

a wide variety of sexual orientations, racial identities, etc." This student's response suggests a

specific political issue that might be seen as the litmus test for the Millennial generation's ability

to deal with ambiguity: the fact that they endorse gay marriage at rates much larger than those

found in any of the generations before them. I don't think this endorsement comes merely from

the fact that younger generations can be more liberal than their elders, or from the fact that their

parents may have more liberal attitudes toward sexual orientation and identity than their

grandparents did, though these are certainly contributing factors. I think that this endorsement comes from an ability to recognize that there is not just one form of sexual identity, that there needs to be space for one's own interpretations and experiences of self, of sexuality, of society, of roles, and of relationships. Millennials live in a world that sees increasing numbers of interracial and interfaith unions, blended families, forms of sexual identities and sexual transformations; they live in a world of ambiguous signifiers, according to which identities are not easily read and assumptions are constantly challenged. They not only live in this world, but they are the ones who are creating it. More honest, perhaps, than even that most honest of generations, the Baby Boomers who are the parents of so many of them, they know that there is no such thing as "perfect clarity" and further, they know that, even if there were, it has no "chance[ ] of being a truthful image of an obscure and mysterious world."

And, I believe, they, or at least a significant number of them, like it that way. Perhaps then, when we study the Millennials, we should resist labels, or at least question them as best we can, and question why we need them. Perhaps we can resist our own desire for "clarity" in relation to this large, diverse, and challenging generation. And perhaps we can conclude, with Martin at the end of *Candide*, "'Let's work without theorizing .. . it's the only way to make life bearable.'" Instead, we can work with these students with awareness and mindfulness, but without preconceptions, listening to them and learning from them so that with them, we can, and I can't resist this just once, "cultivate our garden.'"

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[i] Andre Maurois, "Appreciation," Voltaire's *Candide* (trans., Lowell Bair) (New York, Bantam Classics, 2003), 6.
[ii] This data was gathered in two successive classes in late March 2011 in English 348, Women Writers of the Middle Ages, taught by Sheila Fisher from Trinity College.