

GENERATION Y: INDUCTIVE LEARNERS?

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Abstract

Numerous articles have been published on the learning preferences of “Generation Y.” Born between 1978 and 1995, members of Gen Y are sometimes referred to as “cyber kids,” having grown up with computer-based technologies. Matulich (2008) elaborates, “As we move deeper into the 21st century, the term ‘Digital Native’ is being used to describe people who are used to the instantaneity of hypertext, downloaded music, phones in their pockets, a library in their laptops, beamed conversations and instant messaging.”

As a result, Gen Y students are thought to have short attention spans, prefer visuals and active learning, and to be comfortable with digital technologies (Black, 2010). Not surprisingly, pedagogical strategies for appealing to this generation have followed accordingly, i.e., shorter lectures, use of visuals, experiential learning activities and the use of computers, etc. (Snell, 2000).

Comfort and familiarity are likely valid reasons for Generation Y’s preference for the pedagogical strategies listed just above. However, we propose that the advent of the Internet and the resultant instantaneous availability of information have “trained” Generation Y to think, and learn, inductively.

Inductive Versus Deductive Learning

If one has been trained to learn inductively, one will be most comfortable with examining several examples of a particular phenomenon and then utilizing logic and reasoning to determine what the general phenomena is. This process of learning has been available to Generation Y as they have grown up with the Internet. Want to learn about basket weaving? Google “basket weaving,” view YouTube videos on the topic, etc. Of course, the learner must ascertain what information is valid and applicable. In contrast, previous generations would have found collecting a large number of examples to be arduous and time consuming. For them, it was more efficient to take a class or check out a book at the library. Both of these approaches would tend to start with an introduction and overview and then progress into specific examples or exercises; in essence, a deductive teaching approach.

Therefore, we believe that based on practice, Generation Y students arrive at college with well-developed skills in inductive reasoning and weaker skills in deductive reasoning. When presented with a linear, lecture-based course that begins with general theory and then moves to specific examples, the Generation Y student is, in fact, being asked to use cognitive skills that are not well developed. While not definitive, neuroscience would tend to support this conjecture. For example, Goel (2007) reviewed multiple studies that showed that different parts of the brain are used to understand events depending on whether the subject has a familiar context (deductive) or not (inductive).

Methodology

We began exploring this question by asking students how they prefer to learn. Students in several sections of Principles of Marketing were asked to identify a subject or skill they would like to learn about and then were asked to list the various methods they would use for learning (see Exhibit 1). After recording their unprompted responses, they turned to the second page of the survey, where various methods of learning – both traditional/deductive in nature (lecture,

book) and inductive in nature (web search, YouTube, etc.) - were listed. Students were then asked to indicate how they might change their initial responses. The prompted responses were requested to check for bias as the surveys were being completed in a structured university classroom and we were concerned that this might influence the responses. All responses were categorized into one of four categories: Mildly inductive, strongly inductive, mildly deductive, and strongly inductive.

Results

On an unprompted basis, 73% of the students showed preference for an inductive mode of learning. With prompting, the percent jumped to 81%.

Discussion

The results are consistent with the view that today's Generation Y students prefer an "inductive" mode of learning. However, many questions and areas for research remain. Are the categorizations valid? Why do students prefer inductive approaches? Is it simply familiarity as has been suggested or is it more fundamental as we propose? How do faculty prefer to teach?

References Available upon Request