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'Rude' texting students say they're only multitasking

By Mike Cronin
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Baby boomers and Gen Xers just don't get it.

It's possible to text message a friend and listen to a professor at the same time, say millennials, the name given to the generation of people born from 1977 to 2002. That's multitasking. It shouldn't offend professors and administrators.

"I can survive without responding to texts, (but) I simply don't see the necessity of not answering," said Kevin Morrison, 21, a senior history major at the University of Pittsburgh who is president of the student government board.

The use of high-tech gadgets is just one issue separating students on Western Pennsylvania campuses from generations past.

Some experts and students say today's undergrads don't understand what's appropriate or required in a real-world work environment, and some experts say parents of today's college students have been so involved in their children's lives that millennials don't have the ability to make decisions.

"Parents have insinuated themselves into what was once the child's world," said Dr. Alvin Rosenfeld, 64, a Manhattan-based child psychiatrist who studies family interactions and is the author of five books. "There's been an emphasis on accomplishment and activities, rather than character and relationships."

"Millenials" — with one "n" — typically refers to those who believe in apocalyptic, end-of-the-world scenarios, but "millennials" refers to the generation following Generation X, said Alex Steed, 26, a Boston-based consultant who runs the Web site, Millennials Changing America.

Defining a generation

Defining millennial birth years varies, but Bruce Tulgan, a cofounder of Rainmaker Thinking in New Haven, Conn., whose consulting firm advises companies on managing young talent, says millennials total about 70 million.

That makes them the second-largest generation after baby boomers, the 78.2 million born between 1946 and 1964, according to the Census Bureau.

Millennials are confident and self-possessed because they are "the great oversupervised generation," Tulgan said. These children were taught to believe they are special and deserve recognition just because of who they are. They

aren't always cognizant that rewards require hard work.

"They're going to be the most high-maintenance work force in the history of the world, but also the highest-performing," said Tulgan, author of the book "Not Everyone Gets a Trophy: How to Manage Generation Y."

They'll be the highest-performing, partly because of their skilled use of technologies that didn't exist when baby boomers and Gen Xers grew up, such as smartphones and Internet search engines.

Tech-savvy profs admired

Millennials appreciate professors who bring technology into the classroom, whether it's YouTube, PowerPoint or posting grades online after assignments, said Theresa Conley, 27, a junior at Seton Hill University in Greensburg.

"That way, you can see where you're at and what you're getting, so you're prepared," said Conley, a communications and creative writing major.

Michele Papakie, 41, a journalism and public relations professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, encourages use of smartphones in her classes. But she acknowledges that her courses, such as social media, naturally lend themselves to texting while she's teaching.

Texting became a point of contention during a panel discussion at Pitt last semester. It stunned some professors and administrators that students couldn't understand why texting during class, or in the middle of a face-to-face conversation, would be considered disrespectful.

Millennials don't view that as rude or offensive, because they grew up using technology that previous generations didn't have, said Kari Rosenkaimer, 20, a Pitt sophomore studying nursing.

"One of the most important things we want to get across to professors is that we're not ignoring them when we're texting," Rosenkaimer said. "We're still listening. We're still taking notes. We're just doing something urgent."

As examples of "something urgent," Rosenkaimer cited a member of an extracurricular school group needing a key or organizing the logistics of creating event fliers that "need to be done today."

Today's generation requires that, most of the time, millennials respond to texts immediately, she said. "That's the way technology has made it."

Not all students agree.

"I think it's disrespectful," said Nicole Roser, 22, an IUP senior majoring in journalism. "It's distracting to other students if you hear clicking. It disrupts the whole class."

What's acceptable?

Inconsistent expectations and behavior among professors about cell-phone use make it difficult to know what is acceptable, said Amanda Reed, 22, a Pitt senior majoring in philosophy.

"Some professors answer their cell phones in class," Reed said.

Seton Hill professor Mike Arnzen puts his texting policy in the course syllabus: If students place his class in the background by texting, he marks them as absent.

"Because they're not attending," explained Arnzen, 42, chair of the school's division of humanities. He has even experienced students answering cell phones in class.

"It's very rare, but I see it as rude. I take it as an insult," he said. "I tell them to take it in the hallway. Then, after class, I'll talk to them. Teachers find themselves policing basic civility more than we used to."

Mary Crane, 50, who runs a Denver-based firm that teaches companies how to deal with generational differences, said that to show respect to superiors, employees should turn smartphones off when they enter meetings. Colleges and universities could begin training students for post-graduation is by asking them to turn off smartphones when they start class.

"By the time they enter the work world, they'll be in the habit of turning it off," Crane said.

Kathy Humphrey, Pitt's vice provost and dean of students, said Pitt has no schoolwide policy regarding texting in classes. Instead, professors set policies, typically in a class syllabus.

It's "quite fascinating," she said, that millennials don't regard texting as disrupting.

"But it's such a part of their existence that they don't," said Humphrey, a mother of two 18-year-old high school students.

Mike Cronin can be reached at mcronin@tribweb.com or 412-320-7884.

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