All supervisors want their student(s) to develop the requisite skills, attitudes and knowledge that are essential for graduating with competency in their profession. Indeed, taking a student on placement is indicative of the supervisor’s desire and commitment to mentoring and guiding the student towards the attainment of these essential skills and attributes. The most successful placements – from the student’s perspective – are those in which the student has had a good relationship with their educator and have been facilitated towards independence with some degree of autonomy in that particular work setting. While many studies have reported that the most preferred characteristics of the supervisor are that they are enthusiastic and approachable (Francis et al, 2016; Perram et al, 2016), students have also used the term ‘belonging’ in their descriptions of successful placements (Hills et al, 2016a).

‘Belonging’ is the human need to be accepted, recognised, valued and appreciated by a group (Maslow, 1943). Social scientists have defined ‘belongingness’ as a feeling of being respected and appreciated and having an integral role in an environment, which is achieved through participation in that setting (Anant, 1969). People who experience ‘belongingness’ feel they ‘fit in’ as they feel needed, valued and accepted (Hagerty et al, 1992). However, it is not only the relationship with the supervisor that facilitates this essential feeling; it is also being part of the team, feeling like a colleague – and for students it has been reported as a prerequisite to both enabling and optimising their learning (Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008).

In order to create a feeling of ‘belongingness’, the placement must begin with consideration of the student’s attributes in relation to their learning needs and preferences. This recognises that we do not all learn in the same way. To begin with acknowledging difference enables individualised learning approaches to be adopted. Considerations such as learning style, gender; cultural and family background; or the presence of a health condition or disability, may be important starting points, in addition to the student’s life and previous work experience relevant to the area of practice (Larkin and Hamilton, 2010). However, age or ‘generation’ has been noted as another factor that can affect student learning in placement (Larkin and Hamilton, 2010).
In her book *Generation Me* (2006), Jean Twenge describes the fundamental premise which underpins a generational perspective:

> Everyone belongs to a generation. Some people embrace it like a warm familiar blanket, while others prefer not to be lumped in with their age mates. Yet, like it or not, when you are born dictates the culture you will experience. This includes the highs and lows or pop culture, as well as world events, social trends, economic realities, behavioural norms, and ways of seeing the world. The society moulds you when you are young and stays with you the rest of your life.
>
> (Twenge, 2006, p 2)

Defining differences in generational cohorts was first proposed by the German sociologist Karl Mannheim in the 1950s. Mannheim (1952) postulated that each generation has a similar worldview due to exposure to common historical and social events during their formative years. Every member of a specific generation will not have experienced the same life events, but they will have a shared awareness which creates a type of ‘generational personality’. This is attributed to belonging to the same generational age group and sharing a common location in the social and historical world. Subsequently, generational classifications have been developed by social commentators in westernised countries. These include the ‘GI Generation’ (born 1901–1924); the ‘Silent Generation’ (1925–1942); the ‘Baby Boomers’ (1943–1960); ‘Generation X’ (1961–1981); ‘Generation Y’ or ‘Millennials’ (1982–2002) and ‘Generation Z’ from 2003 onwards (Prendergast, 2009). Supporters of a generational perspective have argued that each generation’s personality has a unique set of characteristics, developed as a result of their experiences during their formative years. These characteristics comprise beliefs, values, attitudes and expectations, which affect behaviour in general, as well as in educational and work settings (Boudreau, 2009; Lavoie-Tremblay et al, 2010).

Foster’s (2013) analysis of the narrative discourse of workers confirmed that being part of one generation or commenting on other generations is a reality in contemporary society. For example, in this author’s research, participants used language such as ‘that generation’ or ‘the younger generation’ and ‘my generation’, when discussing approaches to doing things differently in the workplace. But many qualified these stereotypical comments by stating that not everyone of a particular generation fits the generalisation. Foster (2013, p 211) concluded that a generational perspective:

> ...proves particularly useful when people attempt to understand and convey perceived differences in older and younger contemporaries, and the social, cultural, and especially technological changes affecting their lives. It is a one-word lens through which both choice and determinism are rendered visible in the lives of others.
### Table 1.1  Societal influences during the formative years of generations

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Notable occurrences</strong></td>
<td>Civil rights movement</td>
<td>Rise of mass media and consumerism, end of Cold War</td>
<td>Globalisation, digital age, age of terrorism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major influences</strong></td>
<td>Family and education</td>
<td>Media, AIDS, nuclear disasters as well as family and education</td>
<td>Witness the growth of millionaires. Digital explosion. Family major influence. 'You are special'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entertainment</strong></td>
<td>Television</td>
<td>Multiple TV channels, VCR, Nintendo, cinema</td>
<td>YouTube, live streaming, multiple media and technologies. Social media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication and technology</strong></td>
<td>Touch-tone phones, calculators</td>
<td>Mobile phones, beepers, laptops, email</td>
<td>More complex mobile technologies, WiFi, social media, creation of apps, more interactive video gaming and computer programs. Most homes own a computer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spending styles</strong></td>
<td>Buy now pay later –with plastic</td>
<td>More cautious – pessimistic Security</td>
<td>Growth in designer labels and personalised items, ie phone covers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Value</strong></td>
<td>Regularity, predictability</td>
<td>Fun, want challenges</td>
<td>Fun but want to achieve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work ethic</strong></td>
<td>'It pays to work hard’ – workaholics</td>
<td>Satisfying teamwork</td>
<td>Likes teamwork but wants to achieve. May have multiple careers.</td>
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(Adapted from Prendergast, 2009)
Task 1.1

Define which generation you are from.

Do you think those from older generations have different values from you? Consider choice of food, management of money, work-life balance, life or work expectations, use of technology, parenting styles or attitude to diversity. Were there any behaviours that you consider acceptable that older generations would not have considered to be acceptable?

Think about having a conversation about when you were young. What would you discuss when reminiscing about your formative years with peers: music? films? TV? toys or gadgets? clothes or fashion? social life? food? Or would you consider world events, politics, or national disasters? Consider the social structures experienced by those from the generation before yours. Do you think that there are differences? Are some of your values different as a result of these experiences?

Now think of younger generations: do their values differ from your own?

In the main, there are three generations in the workplace, each having different learning preferences generated from their experiences in their formative years.

Any one of these generations could be a supervisor or a student but it is Generation Y who are given most consideration in the literature as they comprise the majority of the current student population.

Generation Y: Who are they?

‘Generation Y’ individuals grew up in prosperous times and have experienced the introduction and wide dissemination of technology. This is claimed to have resulted in a generation of people who are independent, ‘techno-savvy’, entrepreneurial, flexible and hard-working (Tulgan and Martin, 2001). Also known as the ‘Trophy Generation’ (no one loses and everyone receives a trophy just for participating), they have been rewarded for effort rather than for performance. This group therefore are said to be a confident generation with a desire for praise and positive feedback (Crampton and Hodge, 2009). These messages are considered to have resulted in a generation who are emotionally ‘needy’, particularly at work, but who can also be overconfident in estimating their abilities (Crumpacker and Crumpacker, 2007; Shaw and Fairhurst,
2008). However, Howe and Strauss (2000) contend that this also translates into optimism for their future, calling them the next great generation. In one study, placement supervisors reported on their positive attributes, indicating that Generation Y students are not intimidated by hierarchy. They were seen as articulate, assertive, confident, energetic, enthusiastic ‘go-getters’ who are innovative, adapt well to change and will make a difference to future practice (Hills et al, 2015).

These positive characteristics also affect the parenting styles of Generation Y. Parents have micromanaged their Generation Y children’s time by organising their out-of-school activities and social life. They did this in part as a response to ‘stranger danger’ but also to ensure that their children’s life experiences were positive and fruitful for

Table 1.2 The learning differences between three generations

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Strong work ethic; come prepared to the learning opportunity.</td>
<td>Want to learn usable skills. Value knowledge access over knowledge memorisation.</td>
<td>Experts in searching and accessing information, but not necessarily in analysing or synthesising the information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May prefer more traditional methods of learning rather than a self-taught module. Will learn what the educator wants them to learn.</td>
<td>Want things presented in a straightforward manner. Want to learn only relevant information to the work or to pass a course.</td>
<td>Want to take on challenging tasks in their learning environment (thus may appear arrogant if the instruction is vague).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May be less comfortable with technology but are conscientious and accept help (digital immigrant).</td>
<td>Enjoy flexibility in learning, eg self-directed modules (digital native).</td>
<td>Are computer ‘savvy’ and use technology whenever possible (digital native).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn best when experience can be integrated with subject matter.</td>
<td>Want learning to be directly relevant to their work tasks. Don't want to learn something just for the sake of learning.</td>
<td>Expect immediate feedback on their work as they are accustomed to information access 24/7. Need praise for work well done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipate a slower-paced and more formal introduction to the training and rationale for it – like to have a hard copy.</td>
<td>Want to learn in the easiest and quickest way possible.</td>
<td>Need to feel a sense of achievement. Want goals and rules to be transparent. Prefer experiential activities.</td>
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(adapted from The Health Education and Training Institute, 2012)
their academic and social development. Thus the involvement of parents extends into their children’s lives at college and into employment, with some authors noting that some parents contact lecturers and managers to advocate for, or discuss, their children’s (now adults) needs. They are reported to be the most wanted generation due to the increased availability of contraception and abortion and a number of social commentators have agreed that Generation Y perceive themselves as special, but this has also been interpreted as being self-absorbed and narcissistic (Twenge and Campbell, 2008; Twenge and Foster, 2010). They have received consistent and compelling messages from parents and the media that they can achieve what they want to achieve, that nothing is impossible and that they must follow their dreams. However, this parental involvement has also been reported to have put pressure on students to achieve, with one author noting that Generation Y can become ‘trophy children’, with parents boasting about their children’s attainments. This pressure, as well as that of social media, is said to have contributed to the increased anxiety and depression that is reported in this younger cohort. For students on placement, educators may witness a different attitude to both work and learning, as this group may demonstrate more selfish and self-entitled behaviours but also a well-adjusted work-life balance, leaving work on time with their own family being their priority. Rickes (2009) suggests that this model of parenting has resulted in a cohort that will socialise more with their parents and even ‘boomerang’ back to live with parents after college. Twenge (2006) reported that this return to living at home was delaying maturation to adulthood and one Australian author coined the term ‘kid-adults’ due to the number of Australian Generation Y young people who were still living at home (Mackay, 2007). Huntley (2006) suggested that this was less of a personal choice and more of a financial one. She argued that inflation has exceeded the cost of living and salaries have not risen at the same rate, thus members of Generation Y had been denied the opportunity to buy their own homes. Therefore, it is contended that other markers of adulthood such as marriage and children are delayed, resulting in a generation of people who can be flexible but who may also be insecure.

Technology in all its forms has been deemed as having most influence in the lives of this younger generation as it is used for leisure, work, friendship, relationships, banking and shopping. Rickes (2009) reported that for this cohort technology is a necessity as ‘omnipresent and mundane as a toaster’ (p 8). This is reflected in the application of the label ‘digital natives’ with older generations being called ‘digital immigrants’ (Prensky, 2001). However, while the use of technology has been credited with enhancing practice skills, it has also raised concerns for students on placement as having contributed to poor writing and spelling ability, poor professional behaviour and concern for ethical practice on social media, inappropriate use of mobile technologies in the workplace and a reluctance to critically evaluate the reliability of information gained via
web searching. There are also other consequences for this reliance on technology, one of these being that students may not be confident in communicating by phone as they prefer to text. Another is that they can become easily bored in the workplace due to the lack of opportunity for connectivity, gaming and technological stimulation.

This is summarised in a Generation Y blog:

You see, the thing is I'm not a slacker. I'm really not. And it pisses me off when people assume that I am. It's just that I don't give, I can't give, 100% to something that doesn't interest me or when I'm not engaged. I love being busy! I live for it. In my ideal job, I love it so much that I have to answer e-mails while taking a shower. While getting a pedicure, while in my car (STOPPED at a red light, of course) or even, (because my passion for my job goes beyond ALL things) while watching Gossip Girl! I LOVE working. It's what keeps me going. So I need a job that gives me that motivation to engage.

(Cruz, 2012)

Blashki et al (2007) argue that Generation Y is flexible, adaptable and spontaneous with an increased disposition towards participative behaviours and multitasking, but only if the task is interesting and engages them. However, Willingham (2010) refuted the claim that multitasking is essential for Generation Y learning or work, reporting that cognitively a person cannot switch between two tasks and do them well. In respect to placement, the question of how to engage this group in seemingly boring and mundane tasks is relevant, as many of these tasks are an essential part of practice. Students may be reluctant to engage in tasks that do not give them the opportunity to develop and ‘shine’. They are said to be ‘assessment-driven’ and their educational experience has taught them to focus on ‘ticking the boxes’ on marking grids and assessment matrices, rather than engaging in the deep learning necessary for successful practice learning (Keating et al, 2009).

The Generation Y student

Due to these generational characteristics, ‘Generation Y’ students have been identified as having different expectations and learning styles to those of previous generations (Oblinger, 2003; Twenge, 2009). Indeed, Prensky (2001) argued that significant changes are required in tertiary education as ‘today’s students are no longer the people our educational systems were designed to teach’ (p 1). In Australia, Hills et al (2012) investigated occupational therapy supervisors’ views on Generation Y students and found that most considered that ‘Generation Y’ students exhibited many of the classic generational personality traits. These included being techno-savvy, overconfident, easily bored, in need of constant feedback and praise, and having a different
more casual communication style which was sometimes interpreted as a lack of professionalism. They also appeared more self-focused than client-focused, which was criticised by supervisors. Supervisors however praised their technological ability and considered that this skill will benefit the future of the profession. Concern was expressed regarding Generation Y students’ apparent overconfidence resulting in a ‘skimming’ approach to reasoning and decision-making in their rush to get to the end point, as well as difficulty in accepting negative feedback. This survey was replicated with another group of supervisors in a different part of Australia and similar themes arose, with the additional observation that students’ technological ability indicated that they are skilled in searching out evidence-based practice, which was valued by supervisors (Hills et al, 2015).

A generational cautionary tale

Before proceeding to identifying strategies to facilitate learning for cohorts of Generation Y students, there has to be a word of caution. Of course, not every student will be the same. Taking a generational perspective can be seen as unhelpful stereotyping and a form of moral panic that serves the agenda of some universities in explaining why the ‘younger’ student is not accepting of their traditional and outdated ways of learning (Bennett et al, 2008; Sternberg, 2012). All these criticisms may be true. However, taking a generational perspective can alert the supervisor and student to one explanation of different attitudes and approaches to learning. It can facilitate a conversation. It aims to create an awareness of possible differences. It alerts both parties to the possibility of generational reasons for difference or dissonance on placement. Indeed, you may come across a ‘Baby Boomer’ supervisor who is more technologically competent than a Generation Y student, or an underconfident Generation Y supervisor with an overconfident Baby Boomer student. Like learning styles and other mechanisms of getting to know your student it is a highlighter, not a predictor of difference. It stimulates an understanding or provides a possible explanation.

Socialisation in this context can be defined as the process whereby students develop the expected capabilities of the profession with its own culture and requirements (Higgs, 2013). Socialisation into a profession is more than learning knowledge and skills; it can only be attained through participation in the culture of the profession through experience in a range of contexts and practice communities. With this in mind, below is some guidance on practice learning with Generation Y, which may be of equal relevance to other generations but has been generated from investigating Generation Y students’ teaching and learning preferences on placement (Hills et al, 2016a).
Welcoming the student

It is crucial to welcome the student to the setting and the team but also to be clear about expectations of professional behaviour from the first day of placement onwards. This might include dress code, acceptable language, work hours and breaks, use of mobile phones and access to the computer. These are important as role modelling alone may not be sufficient to ensure that the student is aware of required behaviours in the agency. Once it is clear, the student will appreciate the opportunity to demonstrate that they can achieve these standards. Remember that they want to be part of the whole team, so ensure everyone is part of the welcoming environment.

Getting to know the student

Students want supervisors who want to get to know them, as a person, as a learner and as a colleague. This is an ongoing process throughout the placement and is a reciprocal relationship. Students value those educators who share the challenges they experienced when they were students. They want the supervisor to acknowledge and build on their existing skills and knowledge. So, start with their needs and expectations of the placement. Competency assessment forms provide examples of what they are expected to demonstrate by the end of the placement. This will help the student to focus – but it is important to ensure that routine and mundane tasks are included. Identifying special projects for the student to complete may be a successful strategy for them to showcase their learning and provides an opportunity for them to achieve something particular that may contribute to the team.

Developing competence

‘Learning by doing’ is not a new concept as it is embedded in almost all learning theories. But developing competence is more than completing a task to a practice standard or competency; the student must also be able to ‘think’ to a practice standard. According to Moore (2012), Generation Y students may expect the supervisor to have all the answers and to provide exceptionally clear direction. This group want the educator to talk through their thinking so they can have insight into practice problem-solving and decision-making. But for the student to develop their thinking, they need to be encouraged and facilitated to explore the ambiguity and uncertainties of practice. The student needs to be able to discuss their work with the educator so that the educator can agree or disagree, debate, explore and analyse, confirm or deny the accuracy of their practice thinking. Without ‘talking’ the work, there may
be frustration in that the student considers they have completed the task (ticked the box) to standard, when in fact they failed to notice some crucial non-verbal cues that would require further investigation. As Generation Y are goal orientated, I recommend including aspects of ‘talking’ the work in weekly supervision sessions. This will motivate the student to develop the important skill of practice thinking, while also meeting their need for clarity of expectations of performance.

Feedback

The preference for feedback and praise in this generation is well documented, as is the fact that they may not respond well to negative feedback. Members of this generation appear to want as much feedback as possible – after an event, at the beginning or end of the day and in weekly supervision. But they can also be seen as goal-orientated achievers. Students have indicated that they want to be given the opportunity to self-evaluate before being given feedback so that they can ‘rank’ their own progression towards competency (Hills et al, 2016b). They also want ‘pointers to improve’ from the educator. In effect, feedback is less ‘back’ and more ‘forward’. To feed-forward removes the need for ‘negative’ feedback, which can lead to emotional responses from both supervisor and student. To feed-forward means there is a plan of what needs to be done differently next time and this can be proposed by the student and confirmed or refined by the educator. ‘Empty’ praise, ie that which is not deserved, is not valued by students, so use praise only when deserved and required. However, praise or feedback from others, including other team members and service users, is highly valued and should be encouraged as ultimately it is this that confirms that the student has achieved a feeling of ‘belonging’ to the team or service.

Use of technology

Technology is part of everyone’s life and while you may need to give ethical guidance on use of social networking sites and appropriate use of mobile technologies, careful use of technology is to be encouraged. Moore (2012) reported on various ways in which technology can be used in social work practice. I am certainly aware of students using their mobile phone to look up new terms or diagnoses but this may be problematic if this has not been agreed with the supervisor, who may be thinking that the student is using their phone for personal use. Technology can enhance learning and advance practice, and Generation Y may be just the group to lead these types of developments.
Conclusion

Being a facilitator of student learning on placement means being student centred. This chapter has considered the relevance of a generational perspective to facilitating students’ learning. A skilled facilitator starts with the students’ needs rather than those of the supervisor. A generational perspective should not be based on the notion of stereotype but rather encourages a more nuanced consideration of difference. ‘Generation’ is a lens through which to consider differences in attitudes, behaviours and ways of learning that may be particular to each generational group. Successful placements invariably conclude with the student feeling that they are a valued team member and colleague and that they are ‘part of’ the service and their profession. Awareness of generational issues may be one contributing factor in ensuring that this goal is achieved.

References


