



## Millennial learners: Perceptions and expectations of out-of-class communication

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### Abstract

Millennial learners have grown up in a world drastically different from the faculty who teach their courses. Scholars suggest millennials require unique pedagogical approaches, which extend to the method that faculty use to illustrate immediacy as well as expectations for out-of-class communication (OCC). This study identifies key expectations millennial learners hold for OCC and the perceptions that have led to these increased communication expectations. In particular, this study found that millennial learners have a staunch expectation of OCC in an educational environment due to the fact that they believe OCC increases their individual learning. Thus, their OCC expectations reveal a desire and commitment to a robust education. Findings provide recommendations for best practices and communication of OCC expectations from faculty to millennial learners.

### Introduction

Millennial learners have grown up in a world drastically different from the faculty who teach their courses (Gerhardt, 2014). The students graduating from universities around the country between 2018-2020 have grown up in a world of connection, including never having lived in a time without having Google at their fingertips to instantaneously find information (Beloit College, n.d.). Millennial learners enter classrooms with entirely new conceptions regarding communication, speed of responses, and accessibility from faculty members (Kim, 2017; Gerhardt, 2014). Thus, new pedagogical approaches are needed to meet the distinct needs of this generational cohort of learners.

One growing characteristic is that millennial learners enjoy robust communication in a student/faculty relationship (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Pogue & Ahyun, 2006). This desire has led to an increase pedagogical focus on the role of out-of-class

communication (OCC), often through a lens that examines the role of technology within the constant communication environment now found in higher education (Kim, 2017). This speed and expectation of connection between faculty and students, however, has caused some professors to grow concerned about the increased expectation (and expanding footprint) of faculty time. One such example of this increased time-investment is found in social media use by faculty (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013). Pearson Learning Systems, which regularly produces studies to examine the perspectives of faculty regarding social media in the classroom, found that while many faculty agree with benefits that can come with the integration of social media, nearly “48 percent of faculty report that digital communication has increased their stress level” and “nearly two-thirds of faculty report that digital communication has increased the number of hours that they work,” (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013, p. 6).

**Keywords:** Out-of-class communication, millennial learners, pedagogy

Social media, however, is just one context where it has become apparent that understanding millennial learner expectations and perceptions is a crucial component to the faculty/student dynamic in higher education communication (Kim, 2017).

This study seeks to fill the gap in literature regarding out-of-class communication between millennial learners and faculty by identifying not only what expectations millennials hold for OCC but also why those perceptions may be so important to them.

### Literature Review

As faculty consider the pedagogical and learning implications for activities, such as OCC, it is crucial to examine millennial learners as a unique genre of student. Gerhardt (2014) argues the importance of understanding generational differences by pointing out that “a search of *Educational Source Complete* shows a several fold increase in academic articles focusing on generational differences published from 2000-2013 (283 articles) when compared to those published from 1990-1999 (39 articles)” (p. 1533). This focus on generational differences is particularly important in an educational setting.

Joshi et. al (2010) suggest that there are three primary ways that groups form a generational identity. The first is age-based identity, which focuses on “chronological memories and formative experiences,” (Gerhardt, 2014, p. 1536). Another classification is cohort-based, which refers to groups that are clustered together based on entering organizations or situations at the same time. The third would be incumbency-based, which looks at the current role that is held in an organization at a given moment. Gerhardt (2014) has suggested that using age-based identity theory in approaching millennial learners in classrooms makes the strongest sense:

Members of a common generation have their own unique reactions to socializing mechanisms, such as parenting styles that were popular when they were children, societal values or trends, and subsequently perspectives on learning and achievements. (p.1536)

Scholars have found that millennials do, in fact, have a unique set of values and experiences that make them distinct when it comes to education (Hershtatter & Epstein, 2010; Strauss & Howe, 2000). Wilson & Geber (2008) even argued that these differences would call for a variety of “nuanced pedagogies” in order to effectively engage millennial learners. In light

of this focus on nuanced educational practices, out-of-class communication (OCC) is a growing pedagogical tool.

Scholars have found that OCC has a powerful impact on students’ collegiate experience (Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Jaasma & Koper, 2002; Kim, 2017). One way OCC influences students is the role it plays in helping them adjust and integrate in a higher educational setting (Jaasma & Koper, 1999). In addition, OCC tends to increase students’ academic learning and overall evaluation of faculty as well (Terenzini, Parascarella, & Blimling, 1996; Jaasma & Koper, 1999). Scholars have also found that OCC provides the opportunity to increase not only student motivation in a course, but also trust in an individual faculty member (Jaasma & Koper, 1999). Overall, OCC appears to provide the chance for faculty to leverage robust opportunities to enhance their students’ learning (Kim, 2017).

As with most constructs, OCC is multi-dimensional. Scholars have identified specific measures and categories that make OCC particularly effective. For example, by identifying the differences between Chinese and US college students’ interactions with faculty, Zhang (2006) found that OCC behaviors differed based on ethnic background. Differences in OCC may include whether the communication is focused on personal problems or coursework, as well as the method to engage in OCC (such as visiting during office hours or choosing to email instead). Further extrapolating the dimensions to OCC, Jaasma & Koper (1999) suggest OCC should be defined using metrics of frequency, length, content and student satisfaction. They found that OCC in the form of office visits tend to differ greatly in content and frequency compared to OCC via informal communication. With the increased use of technology, students have an increasing opportunity to interact with faculty in informal ways, such as through social media or via text. Thus, a growing body of scholars are examining the specific ways in which technology may intersect with OCC.

Given the advances in social media, learning management systems, and virtual communication, technology has drastically impacted OCC in higher education. For example, Kim (2016) found that using social media in courses resulted not only in students feeling that they knew faculty to a greater extent, but also in their belief that they were creating personal learning environments where they could show self-efficacy in learning. In other words, social media creates

immediacy in OCC within the student/faculty relationship. However, despite the potential for technology to enhance OCC and connections with students, faculty have voiced some reservations about the way technology and OCC intersect. These concerns relate to time, privacy, professionalism and content.

Technology (both via email and social media) seems to increase the time footprint required for faculty to fulfill their jobs. Beyond finishing the demands of a work day, faculty often feel they then have additional hours of using technology to respond to students, instead of seeing them over an office hour or in class (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013). This can create a tax on faculty who desire to engage in OCC but also are focusing on maintaining balance in their professional and personal lives.

In addition, faculty have expressed concerns over technology and privacy, both for themselves and for their students (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013, p. 3). In the world of technology, personal information seems to saturate many platforms. This seems natural, because it was designed to connect people in informal and formal ways, in order to build relationship. This can pose a problem for faculty and students alike, however, as they may reveal information that would normally be kept private from the faculty/student relationship.

Perhaps largely related to the concept of privacy, research shows faculty should have greater consideration and intentionality when dealing with self-disclosure and personal information in virtual spaces (Kim, 2017). Students want to feel connected and be able to communicate, but there is also a fine line that seems to exist where students feel that faculty may move from being relatable and move into being unprofessional. Essentially, faculty and students alike must deal with context collapse when engaging in OCC through social media. Context collapse happens on social media as individuals share information with many different groups at the same time. While a faculty person may communicate in one way with family, another way with friends, another way with colleagues, and still another way with students, in the world of social media individuals share the same message with all people. This can result in people perceiving the communication as inappropriate for the given relationship they have with the person sharing information (Vitak, Lampe, Gray & Allison, 2012).

Finally, while OCC can span from formal to informal topics, it seems when faculty use technology as

a method for OCC, students tend to prefer receiving information related to class assignments and topics, information about the general discipline, or details on what the faculty person is doing related to their job, as opposed to information that reveals personal opinions or preferences (Kim, 2017). This is something that faculty need to navigate. In order to address this tension, some faculty have created private groups on Facebook for students, used a class hashtag, or employed some other method to curate information only related to the course.

As technology allows for 1) the ability to rapidly interact, 2) the potential to build a strong communication climate in classes, and 3) the capacity to share personal information in an appropriate way, the construct of immediacy that occurs due to OCC becomes even more significant for faculty.

Immediacy in the context of higher education is the measurement of closeness between faculty/student relationships. OCC has been shown to have a strong impact on OCC (Jaasma & Koper, 1999). Immediacy is defined as “those communication behaviors that reduce perceived distance between people,” (Thweatt & McCroskey, 1996, p. 198). Immediacy may take the shape of verbal behaviors, such as faculty using “personal examples, humor, engaging in conversations with students before, after, or outside of class, encouraging students to talk” and using inclusive language (Furlich, 2016, p. 12). It may also include non-verbal behaviors such as eye-contact with students, your body position, smiling, and physical proximity to students (Furlich, 2016, p. 12). Scholars suggest that immediacy produces affective learning, motivation and increased learning (Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Furlich, 1996; Jaasma & Koper, 1999).

Just as immediacy can have a positive impact on students, non-immediacy can be the result of “teacher misbehaviors” or “those teacher behaviors that interfere with student learning,” (Thweatt & McCroskey, 1996, p. 199). In other words, while the efforts of faculty to reduce the perceived distance between themselves and students is central to developing positive learning outcomes, the absence of immediacy is equally significant since it has been shown to directly interfere with student learning. In the context of OCC, this may have some interesting ramifications. Whereas faculty who engage in OCC seemingly build immediacy, it may be that for millennial learners, the lack of engaging in OCC by faculty actually turns out to be a misbehavior that hinders learning.

Several scholars have explored the ways that OCC influences immediacy (Jaasma & Koper, 2002; Zhang, 2006; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Pogue & Ahyun, 2006). OCC is an ideal opportunity for faculty to exhibit immediacy behaviors as it allows both formalized opportunities for communication, such as during office hours, and informal interaction, such as via text or social media. While previous scholarship has provided a strong foundation for the relationship between immediacy and OCC, there is additional information needed to understand the unique dynamics faculty face when interacting with millennial learners.

While previous research has explored time-based commitments and expectations that faculty experience in the academy (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013; Kim, 2017), there is a need to explore whether these are expectations that millennial learners truly have of their faculty interactions. In addition, there is a gap in the literature that explores the reason students have certain perceptions regarding OCC, especially when considering the millennial generation. In light of this, the following research questions were developed for this study.

**RQ1:** What are the expectations of millennial learners for OCC in relation to time, method and faculty responsibility?

**RQ2:** What are the perceptions of millennial learners in regards to OCC and immediacy with faculty?

### Methodology

To address these research questions, an online survey was employed. The survey contained several categorical and Likert-scale items, as well as demographic information. It was launched via Survey Monkey, a well-established survey platform, in the spring semester of 2017.

There were 289 participants from a small, private university in the western United States, recruited from a variety of majors and class ranks via email and social media. Out of those who identified gender, 69.9 percent ( $n=201$ ) were female and 29.8 percent ( $n=86$ ) were male. There were 38 (13.1%) freshman, 64 (22.1%) sophomores, 81 (28%) juniors, and 101 (34.9%) seniors who participated. Five participants did not identify their class rank. Participants represented each of the university's seven schools, covering majors such as Business Administration, Public Relations, Journalism and Integrated Media, Human Biology, Music Education, Nursing, Education,

Psychology, and Sociology. This study was approved by the institutional review board and all participants consented prior to beginning the survey. Participants were able to discontinue at any point and received no compensation for completing the survey.

### Instrument

The beginning of the instrument was the informed consent, which was required for all participants. The second portion of the instrument collected demographic information. The third portion of the survey specifically examined expectations of millennial learners through categorical data questions. The first item asked participants to identify when "faculty should respond to student questions" and gave a range of answer, in addition to an "other" option. The next item asked "in what ways should a faculty person be accessible outside of class?" and allowed participants to select as many options as they felt were appropriate, as well as providing the opportunity to identify "other" methods of OCC.

Following the categorical items, the instrument used five-point, Likert-scale items focused on practices, perceptions and values regarding OCC and faculty. All participants were provided with a definition for OCC: "Out-of-class communication in the following questions means anything such as email, social media, office hours, or other appointments that allow faculty to communicate outside of typical classroom conversations." Then, they were asked to respond to the following statements based on their level of agreement with the item, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The items were built from previous theory and findings in OCC literature and millennial learner pedagogy (Kim, 2017; Hershatter and Epstein, 2010; Pogue and Ahyun, 2006; Gerhardt, 2014; Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013). The wording for each Likert-scale item is provided within below, in addition to the basic statistical information for each.

### Results

**RQ1: What are the expectations of millennial learners for OCC in relation to time, method and faculty responsibility?**

The majority of students (63%;  $n=182$ ) felt that faculty should respond to OCC within one business day. Some felt that the ideal response time should be 2-4 hours (17.65%;  $n=51$ ) and others felt two business days was appropriate (13.15%;  $n=38$ ).

Despite the growth in social media, the majority

of students seem to still expect traditional accessibility outside of class. Table 1 provides the breakdown of top responses from participants to the categorical items when asked “in what ways should a faculty person be accessible outside of class?” While other social media options were available, when less than two participants selected an option, it was not included in the table as it did not yield a research finding of trend-expectations from participants.

**Table 1:** Participant Expectations for Methods of OCC Between Faculty and Students

Method	Percent	N
Email	99.65	288
In-Person Office Hours	97.58	282
Learning Management System	72.66	210
Virtual Office Hours	15.92	46
Facebook	4.86	14
Twitter	.70	2

*Note:* Several participants wrote in the “other” column for expectations of faculty, identifying accessibility via a phone or text option as a desire for OCC (5.2%; n=15).

The following sections of the results for RQ1 and RQ2 analyze data from Likert-scale items. Table 2 provides an overview of the results and precise wording for each item.

Setting the foundation for an exploration of millennial learner expectations, part responded to the

**Table 2:** Likert-Scale Items

Items	Range	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
1. Faculty should interact with students outside of classroom time.	4.0	3.99	.73	286
2. I expect clear guidelines for out-of-class communication with a professor to be provided in a syllabus.	5.0	3.97	.86	281
3. Professors who have expressed their availability for out-of-class communication should be free to only respond at the times they previously communicated.	5.0	3.97	.86	281
4. Faculty who respond quickly to out-of-class questions care more about students.	4.0	3.7	.95	288
5. I learn more from faculty who interact with me outside of class time.	5.0	3.91	.93	280
6. It is important for faculty to find time to unplug from student questions via email and social media.	5.0	3.96	.87	283

Likert-scale item: 77.50 percent (n=224) either agree or strongly agree that faculty members should interact with students outside of classroom time, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Faculty Responsibility

Level	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	1	.30
Disagree	5	1.70
Neutral	56	19.40
Agree	157	54.30
Strongly Agree	67	23.2

Participants also strongly agreed that they expect faculty to explicitly articulate the expectations for OCC in the course syllabus. A majority of students (77.50%; n=224) either agreed or strongly agreed with this expectation, as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4:** Communication Standards Identified

Level	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	2	.70
Disagree	16	5.50
Neutral	39	13.50
Agree	153	52.90
Strongly Agree	71	24.60

Participants also established that once a faculty person communicates their availability for OCC, they should be free to only respond during the times articulated. As shown in Table 5, a slight majori-

ty (54.60%; n=152) of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with this Likert-scale item.

**Table 5:** Boundaries for Faculty

<u>Level</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Strongly Disagree	4	1.40
Disagree	48	16.60
Neutral	77	26.60
Agree	107	37.00
Strongly Agree	45	15.60

Based on the findings regarding communication for OCC standards and faculty boundaries in communication, the following hypothesis was developed:

H1: The more a millennial learner indicates that it is important for faculty to clearly articulate OCC boundaries in course syllabi, the more he or she will also indicate faculty should be free to abide by those boundaries. This hypothesis was supported.  $F=8.05, df=1, P=.005$ . Throughout this study, a p margin of .005 was used to indicate acceptance of a hypothesis.

**RQ2: What are the perceptions of millennial learners in regards to OCC and immediacy with faculty?**

**Rapid response and student care.** The first scale item measured whether participants felt that, when faculty respond quickly to OCC, they care more about students. The majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (68.90%; n=199), as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6:** Rapid Response and Student Care

<u>Level</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Strongly Disagree	7	2.40
Disagree	29	10.00
Neutral	53	18.30
Agree	150	51.90
Strongly Agree	49	17.00

The second scale item explored whether participants felt that they learn more from faculty who interact with them outside of class time. Again, a majority either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (67.80%; n=196), as shown in Table 7.

**Table 7:** Higher Learning with OCC

<u>Level</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Strongly Disagree	1	.30
Disagree	21	7.30
Neutral	62	21.50
Agree	113	39.10
Strongly Agree	83	28.70

The third scale question explored the belief that faculty also need to find time to unplug from students' questions via email and social media. As shown in Table 8, a majority either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (75.98%; n=215; mean=3.96).

**Table 8:** Unplugging from OCC

<u>Level</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Strongly Disagree	2	.70
Disagree	15	5.20
Neutral	51	17.60
Agree	136	47.10
Strongly Agree	79	27.30

The following hypothesis was formed to further understand student perceptions of OCC.

H2: The more a millennial learner indicates they will increase learning due to OCC, the more he or she will indicate faculty who engage in OCC care more about students. This hypothesis was supported:  $F=7.97, df=1, P=.005$ .

**Discussion**

**Millennial Learners and OCC Expectations**

Scholars have dedicated significant efforts in examining the impact of OCC within higher education (Jaasma and Koper, 1999; Jaasma and Koper, 2002; Kim, 2017; Zhang, 2006). A unique focus for OCC, however, is understanding the expectations millennial learners, who have grown up in an entirely different context than previous generations. Millennial learners are familiar with a robust level of connectivity, rapid response, and interaction that is unprecedented by previous generations, due to growing up with technology such as the Internet, social media, and Google. In light of this, it is helpful for faculty to understand what millennial learners expect in terms of OCC. This study found that, while technology has rapidly grown in higher education (Kim 2016, Junco, Heibergert, & Loken, 2011; Debbagh & Kitasanta,

2012), millennial learners primarily expect faculty to be available for office hours (in-person), via email and through a learning management system. This seems to indicate that, at least for now, millennial learners are not expecting faculty to use their social media for OCC. While OCC via social media may be welcome, a strong expectation of students for social media OCC does not yet seem to exist. In addition, despite concerns over the extended work-day and added hours due to technology and communication (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013, p. 6), millennial learners are typically not expecting a response in the same day they interact. The majority indicated that a response in one-business day was their expectation.

Perhaps one of the most significant findings from this study is that millennial learners expect faculty to be explicit in course syllabi regarding what kinds of communication are available for OCC and the anticipated pace of response. When faculty do provide this communication, students are more likely to feel comfortable with faculty operating within those boundaries, even if it may deviate from millennial learners' previously specified expectations. Put another way, faculty should feel free to explain to students when they can expect to hear back from questions sent via email or on a learning management system, and then feel equally free to respond to students only within those specified time-frames. This is a helpful area to understand as millennial learners are sometimes characterized as expecting instantaneous responses from faculty. Challenging that notion, millennial learners seem to recognize there are confines in which faculty are able to interact – they simply expect faculty to communicate realistic boundaries at the start of a course so expectations can be established.

### **Perceptions of OCC and Immediacy in Millennial Learners**

**Rapid communication indicating personal care.** Previously scholars have identified that OCC builds the perception of immediacy behaviors in faculty (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Kim, 2017; Junco, Heibergert, & Loken, 2011). This study further builds on that construct by clarifying the underlying reason for this development of immediacy. Participants expressed that rapid responses from faculty members via OCC was more than simply gaining information or answers to questions. For millennial learners, it indicated that faculty care more about them. This study supports previous

findings that millennials are looking for personal connections with those who lead and guide them (Gerhardt, 2014). For millennial learners, responding quickly is a significant sign of faculty concern and affinity towards them as a learner.

**Increased learning due to OCC.** Helping give context to why so many millennial learners believe it is not only a responsibility of faculty to engage in OCC but also why they have such a strong belief that OCC indicates personal care, a majority of millennial learners also believe that OCC will lead to deeper learning. With the changing landscape of higher education, increased costs and many students juggling outside responsibilities, the belief that OCC will result in a greater return on their investment in education is a meaningful finding. Faculty may benefit from considering that millennial learners desire OCC because it represents the potential of a more robust and deeper educational experience for them. This study supported the idea that, when students believe OCC increases their learning, they will believe faculty care more about them when they participate in OCC. In other words, students who believe OCC helps them learn also believe that faculty who make themselves available for OCC have an authentic interest in students' learning experiences.

**Faculty unplugging.** Connecting into the previous section on millennial learner expectations, the perceptions of millennials regarding faculty boundaries is also significant in this study. Participants identified a strong support for faculty unplugging and not responding to student questions continuously. This seems to contradict the notion that millennial learners expect instantaneous answers and connections from faculty at all times. Rather, this study indicates that millennial learners recognize the reality that faculty also are juggling multiple responsibilities. In light of this recognition, they hope that their faculty do get to also step-away from responsibilities. However, they need clear communication as to when faculty will be available. They will see that availability as a sign of care and potential to increase their personal learning in the course.

### **Myths About Millennial Learners and Actions for Faculty**

It may seem easy to form expectations of what millennial learners want from faculty in terms of OCC. Particularly in the context of a generation who has never experienced life without the Internet, has always had



instant messenger, and can, arguably, be labeled the “selfie” generation, there is the potential for pedagogical approaches by faculty to overlook key elements in this unique generation of students. For example, while millennial learners do anticipate responses from faculty and accessibility outside of class, this expectation is largely rooted in the belief that OCC helps them learn more than courses where OCC is not available, as well as the indication that it seems to illustrate genuine care for students by faculty members. Recognizing that the motivation for communication and interaction beyond the regular classroom walls is born out of this context, faculty may actually end up being encouraged by the requests for office hours and emails that students send.

To alleviate the tension faculty feel regarding time constraints and the desire to meet the needs of millennial learners, it may help to schedule in regular blocks of time that are strictly dedicated to OCC with students. While office hours may be a regular practise, it could also help to set aside dedicated time for other methods of OCC that were previously discussed such as email, social media, texting, or informal interaction like going to a campus coffee house. In addition, faculty should be explicit in their communication regarding the opportunity and process for OCC. More than simply listing them in a course syllabus, it may help to regularly identify these standards at the beginning or end of a class period. These conversations may, in fact, still be related to class work (Zhang, 2006) but will provide a robust opportunity for students to feel personally connected to faculty in an informal setting (Gerhardt, 2014).

### Conclusion

Millennial learners are now filling universities. As faculty seek to adjust pedagogy and truly provide a robust learning environment, it is helpful to consider the new values these students bring into classes. Millennials desire a connection and immediacy with those who are providing leadership (Gerhardt, 2014). As faculty work to foster rigorous learning environments, intentionally pursuing OCC is one such pedagogical shift that will enhance learning. Millennials have a staunch commitment to OCC and expect their faculty to provide the opportunity to connect beyond the confines of a classroom. Recognizing that this desire stems from a passion to learn is, perhaps, one of the most significant motivations that a faculty member could have to adopt robust OCC practices

throughout their courses.

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