The Developmental Context of Today's College Students: A Psychological Perspective

In my experience, conversations with fellow colleagues from a variety of programs often lead to discussions and analyses of "today's" college students. I frequently hear statements along the lines that students today are "less engaged" than previous cohorts, "more obsessed" with their cell phones, and simply "less interested" in learning. Sometimes we may joke with each other that it's us getting older, that we are becoming more detached from understanding the youth of today. In reality, though, students today are growing up in a different world from us, in the same way that our world was different from our older siblings, our parents and our grandparents. Each generation grows up in different environmental contexts that in turn lead to distinctive developmental trajectories—the results of which we get to see firsthand in our classrooms. In this article, I want to highlight some of the changes in our students' environments, primarily due to the pervasiveness of portable technology, and how these changes create both challenges and new opportunities for today's students. As teachers, how can we use this knowledge to adapt our teaching style and classrooms to something this generation of students can relate to and benefit from?

One way to consider the lives of today's students is through Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) *Ecological Systems Theory* (cited in Kail & Zolner, 2015). According to this perspective, a person's development is influenced by the interplay of various contexts and environments, called ecological systems. Some of these systems are experienced daily (i.e., the microsystems, such as family, school, and peers) and therefore are anticipated to exert a strong influence on the developing person. In contrast, the exosystems (e.g., parent workplace, community centres) are contexts not necessarily experienced directly or as often, but still have the potential to impact the developing person. For example, if a parent must work overtime or has been laid off, exosystemic factors will likely impact his or her role at home and in family relationships.

While it is the case that each generation of students grows up with its own set of ecological systems, I would argue that one clear difference for today's students is the extent to which technology, especially portable devices like smartphones, has permeated every environmental context described in Bronfenbrenner's theory. They certainly are a big part of students' microsystems. As we have all noticed, smartphones accompany our students everywhere they go—school, home, work—and are used to interact with peers, friends and parents. While these microsystems have always been important for youth, the key difference for students today is that contact with these microsystems can now occur all of the time. Previous generations might have had most of their contact with parents and family after school and in the evenings, but now, students can keep in constant contact even during school hours. There are no more "built-in" breaks from one microsystem to another. This can create more open communication between family members; however, consider the implications of a student who no longer can take a break from their peers. A student who is being bullied at school, for instance, can still be bullied after school, online and through social media.

These examples also illustrate how the interplay between microsystems (i.e., the mesosystems) has changed. For example, teachers post readings, assignments, and grades that students can access at home via their smartphones. Even at younger age levels, the communication between teachers and parents is no longer limited to parent-teacher nights—there are several apps available specifically designed to help teachers keep families informed of their child's progress. Of course this can allow for greater involvement of parents in their child's academic pursuits; however, it does change the dynamic for this mesosystem as it may transfer some of the educational responsibilities that traditionally were handled by students (e.g., asking a teacher for help) to parents, potentially reducing students' obligation to take active responsibility for their learning.

Photo credit Brandon Calder

Smartphone technology has also permeated our exosystems. In Figure 1, we see mass media represented as part of the exosystem; however, I think most of us would agree that that this has changed as access to music, TV, movies, books, and magazines is now at a one's fingertips at all times. As teachers, we have to compete with the appeal of YouTube and Netflix for our students' attention in our classrooms. Knowledge and access to information about our exosystems and macrosystems has also changed—webcams, 24-hour news channels, and Twitter feeds now provide students with a view to their world from anywhere and at anytime. Therefore, the blurring of lines between the various contexts and environments in which our students' grow up has significantly changed with more personal and constant access to technology. This can create a plethora of new opportunities for our students, but it can also create more distractions and challenges. Both of these possibilities have the potential to affect the developing person.

What does all of this mean for adolescent and young adult development? Psychologists tend to consider a person's development according to different domains—physical, cognitive, and social/emotional. In terms of physical development, studies have documented an association between screen time and poor health outcomes, such as obesity and lack of exercise (cited in Twenge & Campbell, 2018). Youth are sleep-deprived, and being distracted by their phones is cited as a common cause. According to one study, 80% of teenagers sleep with their cell phones or place them in proximity to their beds (cited in Solecki & Fay-Hillier, 2015). Sleep deprivation increases

irritability and negative mood; it also negatively impacts cognitive abilities, which in turn diminishes students' academic performance.

Cognitively, one's attention span and concentration levels, as well as on one's ability to multitask and problem-solve, are all negatively affected by increased screen time (Solecki & Fay-Hillier, 2015). This has implications for learning as new memories can only be formed if they are encoded properly. Paying attention is an essential step in the encoding process. In other words, if students are not paying attention in class or as they engage with course readings, proper encoding does not take place. This means that forming, storing and retrieving new memories will not take place. Effort is required to learn new material, and many educators are concerned that today's students are less curious, put in less effort, and are learning material more shallowly than in previous generations due to all the distractions surrounding them as they learn (Solecki & Fay-Hillier, 2015).

In particular, there is concern for how screen time impacts social/emotional development. Because forming, building, and maintaining social connections has progressively moved to online platforms, youth today tend to spend less face-to-face time with their family members and friends than did previous generations. The opportunity for online friendships can be beneficial for some (e.g., youth who live in rural areas, or for youth with particular interests to find like-minded peers); however, longitudinal studies have found correlations between time on social media and an increase in mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Flora, 2018; Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

According to a nationally representative survey of U.S. adolescents over the period of 2010 to 2015, adolescents who spent more time on smartphones (especially on social media) were twice as likely to have received diagnoses of depression or anxiety and needed treatment for mental or behavioral health conditions (Twenge, Joiner, Rogers, & Martin, 2018). For adolescent girls in particular, high smartphone use was associated with an increase in depressive symptoms, suicide-related outcomes, and suicide rates (Twenge et al., 2018).

In Canada, whether it be from smartphone use or not, there are similar concerns over the number of postsecondary students struggling with mental health issues. Forty-one Canadian postsecondary institutions participated in a recent survey with approximately 44,000 students responding; the survey found that 20% of Canadian postsecondary students are depressed and anxious or battling other mental health issues, which was an increase from a study conducted only three years earlier (Chiose, 2016). Some schools across the country have created a "fall break", similar to the midterm winter break, to try and address concerns about students' mental health (Campbell, 2015).

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What is clear from these studies is that certain forms of smartphone use are challenging today's students in ways that are different from previous generations. The effects are experienced in all domains of the developing person. Young people's ability to manage time, to emotionally cope with stress, and to deal with distractions encountered each day on their smartphones can be a struggle.

> *"I think they are exposed to more stress potentially than in the past. With more time to question and explore identities, this requires having to live with more uncertainty. I also see students trying to juggle too much - the pressures of school, jobs, relationships, family life, etc. I also think they have more uncertainty today in terms of what they want to do with their futures."* —Peter Gantous, Psychology teacher

It is important to note that several applications of smartphone use can create new outlets and opportunities for students. Many teachers have found innovative ways to include smartphones as a pedagogical tool in the classroom, creating inclusive new teaching practices. Others have demonstrated that there are many online resources to help youth struggling with personal issues (Flora, 2018). Access to a multitude of sources of information can help students become more flexible, adaptable and open-minded than previous generations.

It has been suggested that today's college students hold higher beliefs of equality (in terms of gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation) than previous generations (Twenge, 2013).

> *"I think today's college student has more diversity of experience and information available to them than past years. They have to make decisions about their identity, roles and relationships, which are becoming less weighted down than previous years by the requirements of their parents. They have to navigate the relatively new identities including ethnic, Montreal culture, sexual, romantic, academic, friendship, familial, occupational, etc. College students would have been fully independent adults in past years or in other cultures today; instead, our students delay this for the goal of a higher education and greater control and independence in the future. They are also optimistic about their chances of a fulfilling life."* —Peter Gantous

What does this all mean for our classrooms, for student learning, and for our teacher practice? Certainly one challenge facing our classrooms is a posture of passivity from students. Whether it be from lack of sleep, or from changes in cognitive or social/emotional development, teachers have certainly noticed a change:

> *"When I enter the class, it is quiet and dark, everyone on their own devices, no chatter. Ten years ago, I used to have to raise my voice, turn the lights off and on to get their attention in order to start the class. Students do not answer the questions I constantly throw out to them and sometimes the classroom is so quiet you can hear a pin drop. This atmosphere almost feels surreal. I can hear my own voice resonate in my head. It is demoralizing and zaps all of my energy and enthusiasm. I have to work really, really hard to get a rise out of them. Over the years, I have always experienced the odd class that was "quiet" but this was an anomaly. The past 3-4 years "quiet" classes seem to have become the norm and the "engaged" class is now the anomaly."* —Lisa Millelire, Psychology teacher

> *"Passivity is a main challenge for current students in the classroom and studying at home. Active learning implies engagement, such as taking notes while organizing and processing the material presented during a lecture and while reading a textbook. Students who engage with active learning approaches tend to learn and understand the course material better."* —Nathalie Viau, Psychology teacher

What can teachers do? One option is to try to get students actually moving whenever possible. These days, students do not need to go anywhere to seek out information for school projects – it is all at their fingertips – so moving around and interacting with others can help get them out of their online "bubble." It is also important to try and help students analyze the information they find online. As we know, not all news is "real," and not all sources are credible. This can be overwhelming, so students need guidance navigating the world of Google and Wikipedia. With the tendency for students to be more passive in the classroom (i.e., fewer questions and less discussion) along with more demands than ever on their time, we need to show

students why coming to class is important. They need to see how each course they take, and even how each subject they study in a course, fits into an overall plan.

> *"Students don't always see a means to an end—they desire instant gratification."*—Lisa Millelire

> *"One of our retired teachers, Frank Winstan, used to leave for class with the phrase, "It's showtime." I think that with the multitude of information and entertainment sources out there, you have to grab the students' attention. This includes using different styles of teaching and preparing for different styles of learners. Ultimately, teachers need to communicate their own genuine enthusiasm about their subject to engage with the students."*—Peter Gantous

Students are also likely to benefit from frequent feedback on their progress. For better or for worse, they are used to receiving "likes" and comments on social media platforms, a phenomenon that has cultivated expectations of immediate feedback. Considering this prevailing trend and its impact on our culture, perhaps small, but more regular feedback from teachers might be helpful to today's students (Twenge, 2013). Not only can students benefit from this feedback, but teachers might also want to take the time to elicit feedback from students about teaching methods and activities. For example, Lisa Millelire, a teacher in the Psychology Department, recently asked a class of her students why they thought class attendance was low in general, and why they seemed less engaged in the classroom. Students were pleasantly surprised to be asked about their ideas. Some comments included:

• No need to attend class when notes are posted on Omnivox. (They also complain of being barraged with Omnivox alerts— another source of being overwhelmed.)

• Students' lives are too busy; we have to make choices of how to spend time.
• Poor quality of teaching - some teachers spend too much time talking about their personal experiences or teaching above students' ability; no variety of teaching mediums.
• Course lecture deemed as not related to course topic, readings or posted notes—don't see the relevance.

Certainly, the lives and minds of today's students are different from our own generation. They are growing up in environmental contexts that have changed dramatically in recent years. As teachers, we need to consider our students' overall development, as well as their strengths and challenges, and adapt our teaching styles and classrooms to these changing needs and learning styles.

> *"We are in a transitional period: the generation that grew up with the internet in their pockets are now in our classrooms. With their help, we need to find new ways to engage and bring them back to life in the classroom."*—Lisa Millelire

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