

MILLENNIALS & CRITICAL THINKING

By Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hais, authors of
"Millennial Makeover: My Space, You Tube and the Future of American Politics."

One of the most often expressed criticisms of the Millennial Generation is that it seems to have lost all ability to analyze data, examine the logic of a proposition, or read a blog and sort out the good and the bad in the argument. Usually described as "critical thinking," this type of skill seems to be absent from a generation focused on sharing, communicating and finding group consensus. Indeed, one of the traits older generations find most annoying about Millennials is their constant "pinging" of friends to find out what the group thinks rather than making a prompt and decisive choice on their own.

As Millennials assume positions of authority within society, many people, particularly those in the Baby Boomer generation, are increasingly concerned about this missing skill and determined to find ways to teach it to a generation raised on the Net. But the very same Boomers who deride Net-based group decision-making would quickly agree that the most effective way to learn is through trial and error. Nature and society evolve using this simple technique and Chaos theory suggests the perfection of the most complex systems occurs through the process of continuing what works and discarding what doesn't. Yet, to a large extent, the use of critical thinking as a means to solve problems contradicts this truth about natural selection and evolution. Rather than having expert thinkers come up with the right solution to a problem, the process of trial and error creates multiple experiments that attempt to solve the problem and uses objective empirical results to determine the best solution. With this approach, more trials - and errors - produce better results.

This is the type of problem solving approach Millennials have used almost since birth. They use it every day on social networks to decide what movie to go to, at which restaurant to eat, and even for which candidates to vote. Rather than insisting on solving challenges using the inherited, but inevitably limited wisdom of experts, Millennials would prefer to share their ideas and let the group find the right answer through their combined experiences. Given how far astray critical thinking has often taken us, maybe it's time to embrace the Millennial Generation's approach and see if it leads to even better results than the preferred methods of older generations.