

Creating a Safe Learning Environment Based on the Experiences and Perceptions of a Millennial Generation

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Abstract : There is evidence that any learning experience should happen in a safe learning environment as students then will interact, experiment, and construct new knowledge. However, little is known about the specific elements required to create a safe learning environment for the millennial generation, especially in optometry education. This study aimed to identify the specific elements that will contribute to a safe learning environment for the millennial generation of optometry students. **Methods:** An intrinsic qualitative case study was undertaken with undergraduate students from the Department of Optometry at the University of the Free State, South Africa. An open-ended questionnaire survey was completed after the application of nine different teaching-learning methods based on the experiential learning cycle. A total number of 307 questionnaires were analyzed. Two focus group interviews were also conducted to provide additional data to supplement the data and ensure the triangulation of data. **Results:** Important elements based on the opinions, feelings, and perceptions of student respondents were analyzed. Students feel safe in an environment with which they are familiar, and when they are familiar with each other, the educators, and the surroundings. Small-group learning also creates a safe and familiar environment. Both these elements create an environment where they feel safe to ask questions. Students value an environment where they are able to learn without influencing their marks or disadvantaging the patients. They enjoy learning from their peers, but also need personal contact with educators. Elements such as consistency and an achievable objective also were also analyzed. **Conclusion:** The findings suggest that to respond to the real need of this generation of students, insight must be gained in students' perceptions to identify their needs and the learning environment to optimize learning pedagogies. With the implementation of these personalized elements, optometry students will be able to take responsibility and accountability for their learning.

Keywords : experiences and perceptions, safe learning environment, millennial generation, recommendation for optometry education

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