

The review:

Generatie Einstein, slimmer, sneller en socialer. Communiceren met jongeren van de 21 eeuw, Jeroen Boschma en Inez Groen, Pearson Education Benelux, 2006, 5th edition

Introduction

A couple of years ago I ran a project for young people from 15 to 19 years at vocational schools, aimed at cultivating networking skills and developing contacts with the local business community. We wanted to acquaint the participants, some of whom were underachievers, with working life in their sector, hoping that this would help them on the path to participation and engagement. These youngsters were in many ways typical of today's youth in the Netherlands. We concentrated on two groups – a younger group who were still at (vocational) high school – in the VMBO stream and a group of older youth who were at the first and lowest level of the next stream up, MBO level 1. I and my colleague soon realized that the goals we had set in the project could not be reached in the given time. The expectations that these young people would be able to do the ground work necessary to form their own networks, to communicate with business representatives, and undertake the steps necessary to assure themselves of a work placement, proved illusory. We reassessed our goals and changed the plan. These young people were not the *Generation Einstein* you read about in the book written by Jeroen Boschma and Inez Groen. As one of our students, Leroy, 17, once said *"the teachers give us too much freedom, they expect us to be able to look up everything ourselves, we get no guidance and there's no structure. We don't even get proper lessons anymore and there's no discipline."*

Generation Einstein was written by Jeroen Boschma and Inez Groen, both working for a communications and advertising company, Keesie, specialized in communicating with youth. The title of their book is a catchy one: *"Generation Einstein, smarter, quicker, more social – communicating with 21st century youth"* and implies that the book is written for a wide audience. Indeed, we read that the book is suitable for anybody who wants to understand and communicate with young people, from policy maker, to marketing specialist to teacher; anyone in fact who's interested in positive communication with young people.

This book is a plea to us all to recognize that the current generation is fundamentally different from preceding generations. Our adult stereotypes of lazy, impertinent, careless and greedy youngsters should be swept aside according to Boschma and Groen. Generation Einstein possesses more positive qualities than any other generation before them. We adults just don't understand young people, leading inevitably to miscommunication and unjust prejudices.

Split into two more or less equal parts, the book first describes the different facets of Generation Einstein, their world and their identity. The second part of the book is about communication with Generation Einstein. It concentrates mainly on professional communication and on the world of marketing and advertising, providing examples of diverse communication tools and highlighting a number of campaigns.

Generation Einstein is compared in part 1 to two other generations: the baby boomers and Generation X, spanning a time period from 1945 to present day. Whereas the baby boomers are described as the protest generation, and Generation X as the lost generation, Generation Einstein is positive about its future, open to the world, authentic, social and connected. According to the authors, the baby boomers had big ideals, Generation X grew up in an ideological vacuum and Generation Einstein have reverted to traditional idealism, where values such as family and friendship dominate. Unlike Generation X, which was individualistic and cynical, the current generation is highly sociable and loyal, and family relations are harmonious and constructive. We, the readers, are

Generation X and our principally different perspective on reality makes it easy to understand why we just don't get them.

The authors combine a description of the identity of Generation Einstein with a simultaneous portrayal of Generation Einstein's world and the context within which they live. The two are one is the adage. The personal characteristics of Generation Einstein are presented as facts not constructions, and are offset against the inexorable complexity of a society characterized by speed, 24/7 mass media, unprecedented wealth, conscious choice, and celebrated commercialism. Our youth is like fish in water in today's society. They understand the world better than we do, they are more prepared for future challenges than we were and they take their role as critical citizens seriously. In a nutshell, they are smarter, quicker and more social, as the title suggests.

Society may be through and through commercialized, but money is not the most important thing for Generation Einstein according to the authors. They are heavy consumers, and represent a huge market for businesses, but Boschma and Groen argue that they are critical buyers who understand the principles of marketing and cannot, therefore, be easily fooled. Generation Einstein knows that knowledge is relative, they have little problem with information overload, able as they are to filter out that what is important to them and to ignore the rest and they are experts in creating an authentic self amidst chaos and fragmentation.

The role of information technology is seen as the most decisive force in defining who Generation Einstein is, and what they stand for. Values such as sharing, solidarity, dialogue, respect and self-development take central stage in the life of Generation Einstein, with authenticity being at the top of the list. The authors take these ideas further in part 2 of the book where they explore the necessity for professionals to be in "contact" with Generation Einstein. It's no good to apply textbook communication and marketing models, as they do not fit with the requirements of the new generation. "*Communication is an art*" (p.97), or so we are informed. The main conclusion of the book that the one-model- fits-all solution doesn't exist, is attributed to Generation Einstein's desire to be informed, not convinced, and their craving for authenticity and honesty. Generation Einstein is media savvy and cannot, unlike their predecessors, be fitted into easily identifiable market segments. Communication is about contact, and to be in contact with Generation Einstein one needs to gain their trust. That's only possible if we're able and willing to understand them.

But how convincing is the picture of Generation Einstein presented by Boschma and Groen? Does Generation Einstein really exist and does this generalization apply to most young people as the authors suggest? Much of Boschma and Groen's evidence comes from trend reports and research or analyses carried out by other communications and media bureaus. Newspapers, the internet and magazine articles are also a much used source. And a fair proportion of the media campaigns illustrated in the book come, perhaps unsurprisingly, from Keesie. One may expect the use of such varied sources to add to the authority of the text. However, in the case of Generation Einstein the opposite is true. It seems as if the authors want to mention as many "experts" as possible to back themselves up, but the reader is left in the end questioning the credentials of many of those quoted.

I personally found the book artificially positive and too one sided, although the authors are successful at creating a sense of intimacy with the audience. They allude to shared values and common views by identifying themselves with the reader by using "we" or "we adults". And by repeating the same arguments over and over, the reader can dip in and out of the book without fear of missing essential points. Part 1, setting out the characteristics of this new generation and the societal context, will appeal to a wider audience than part 2. This last section is mainly of interest to those whose job it is to develop communication campaigns to reach young people. Although even then I would suggest that the ideas of participative media development and concentrating on the message not the instrument (form follows function) are not new. We all know that it's important to take your target

group seriously, and that in order to communicate effectively one should also be able to listen. Don't we?

Authenticity commands respect:

One of the things which really struck me reading this book was the number of times the word "authenticity" is used. Young people are authentic, according to the authors, and they like to be around authentic others. In fact, you can expect to command little respect from Generation Einstein if you are superficial or shallow. The same goes for media campaigns. Generation Einstein can see through lies at the drop of a hat, they can root out the genuine from the false, and they are more likely than any other generation to boycott companies and products which treat others unfairly or which engage in unethical practices. Or so we are told.

But what exactly is authenticity? The writers provide a couple of examples to illustrate their point. For example, the teacher who tries to be cool in order to be accepted is obviously not being genuine. The company which fails to mention in its advertising campaign that it uses child labour is not authentic. And the hanger-on, the follower is also not acceptable to Generation Einstein. The problem however, is the more or less inadequate way in which authenticity is defined. The teacher who is funny, but can't teach is not authentic according to Boschma and Groen. But who's to say that that's not the "real" teacher? That he/she is just a funny person and at the same time a lousy teacher? I especially have qualms with the links to respect. Only authentic individuals deserve respect according to this book. Respect is no longer an automatism, to be shown to anyone irrespective of ability, colour, or status. Instead, it's fully tied in with being true to one's self, whatever that self may be, and to being true to others. But what the authors fail to demonstrate in a convincing manner, is what it actually means to be "real", "authentic", or "true".

Avid consumerism and solidarity:

What Boschma and Groen do well in this book is provide the reader with a convincing description of just how important consumerism is in the lives of this generation. They unabashedly describe the market economy as a fact of life. Just something we all have to get used to. Advertisements and publicity campaigns flood into the lives of Generation Einstein as easily as water flows from the tap, tempting them to buy new, trendy products, and creating new desires, which have to be fulfilled *now*. Generation Einstein wants quick satisfaction and cannot afford to wait. They want to be listened to, and they expect their views to be acted on, immediately. The authors do not beat about the bush when it comes to the world of communications and advertising either. Generation Einstein is an important target group, albeit it a slippery one, and companies want their money. "*We want to sell things to young people*" (p.87) is the first thing we can read, in answer to the question "*why communicate with young people?*" (p.87). So that's that then.

To be fair to the authors, they do mention other reasons to want to communicate with Generation Einstein, such as "*trying to develop their opinions*" (p.88), and "*pointing out dangers to them*" (p.90), but the book's commercial tone overshadows these aspects by far.

Our consumption-based, 24/7 information society, with an online generation whose goals in life are to experience maximum pleasure and happiness, confers greatly with Kunneman's description of the "Dikke-Ik" society ("Big-I society"). Kunneman (2009), who is in fact looking to develop a model beyond the parameters of the "Big-I society", describes in detail the dangers of modernity and excessive individualism. The obsession with consumerism, and the idea that everything is possible if only one tries hard enough, or to put it in the words of Boschma and Groen, if one is "authentic" enough, leads to existential poverty, the marginalization of moral questions and the banishment of vulnerability and pain.

However, whilst Boschma and Groen present a clear and believable picture of modern society, I find their claims that solidarity, friendship and social commitment are key characteristics of Generation Einstein weak and unconvincing. I do not exclude, nonetheless, that my harsh judgement may be down to the fact that my definition of what these terms mean is somewhat different to that of the authors. After all, unlike Boschma and Groen, I would hardly call collecting as many “friends” as possible on social media sites proof of the importance of friends for Generation Einstein. I find the term “*meaningful zapping*” (p.60) almost offensive and I would think twice about describing Generation Einstein as committed to social issues, if commitment is conditional and dependent on the provision of quick answers and taking rapid action. According to the authors “*it’s only worth asking them [Generation Einstein] to commit if their efforts lead in the short term to concrete results*” (p.44). I would argue that this is more reminiscent of Kunneman’s “Big-I society”, than of a generation which is supposed to believe in solidarity and be committed to addressing important social issues. The “*cult of speed*”, described by Paul Cilliers is evidently an accepted reality for Generation Einstein, for whom “*slowness*” is almost a dirty word.

Lateral thinking replaces linear thinking:

One other critical feature of Generation Einstein laid out in the book, is their ability to think laterally instead of in a linear fashion. Generation Einstein would appear to have little problem with the increasing barrage of information, as they are not only experts at managing and filtering data, but also in making sense of what they see, hear, read and consume and in juggling different tasks at the same time. So called multitasking. Boschma and Groen argue that Generation Einstein wants to discover things for themselves, have little need for long explanations, capable as they are of comprehending things easily and without help, and above all they yearn to develop their creativity. The authors acknowledge that this raises problems for the Dutch educational system and they therefore suggest that a new type of system is necessary with new kinds of teachers. The teacher needs less knowledge in the new system and acts more as a coach and guide, facilitating the learning process, rather than providing instruction.

This explanation is, however, too simplistic and does not apply in my view to a majority of today’s youth. In answer to a question on his thoughts on school and teachers, Hamsa (a boy of 17 who is a student at one of the vocational schools I worked at) replied “*we need good teachers who treat you with respect. And who listen and who give normal lessons. It’s not good that we can just hang about all the time because we only get to see the teacher once a week. And it’s not normal that we have to look everything up independently. We need help to avoid making the wrong choices. Decent lessons would help*”. Another, Stefan, 17 said “*this school is OK for young people who like to learn things in a practical way and for youngsters who can deal with the freedom you get here in a responsible way. For me it’s not good. I’d rather work with my head. I’ve got no idea what I’m learning here or why*”.

These experiences concur with two studies carried out by the innovation platform Hiteq; comparing VMBO students¹ and MBO students with Boschma and Groen’s Generation Einstein. Some 1400 VMBO’ers filled in a questionnaire alongside approximately 1600 MBO’ers. 30 to 40 parents and teachers were also interviewed. With only minor differences between the VMBO’ers and the MBO’ers, neither group came close to possessing the characteristics of Generation Einstein when it comes to learning and information processing. In fact, the results showed that on all essential points both VMBO’ers and MBO’ers have different capacities, needs and habits to the Generation Einstein described by Boschma and Groen. In general VMBO’ers and MBO’ers want less freedom and more structure, more instruction and less responsibility. Both groups would appear not to have a problem with linear learning, and in fact may even prefer it, as they have greater difficulty with processing information than Generation Einstein. They are not multitaskers and unlike Generation Einstein,

¹ VMBO is one of the 3 main types of secondary education and accounts for approximately 55% of all students. Source: CBS Education Yearbook 2009, 2nd edition

VMBO'ers and MBO'ers look upon teachers as knowledge authorities and expect them to be teachers in the classical sense of the word, rather than coaches.

So who is Generation Einstein?:

On these, and other points, the Hiteq studies provide an interesting comparison with the purported world of Generation Einstein. Whilst not going into detail on all elements of the comparison, suffice to say that VMBO'ers and MBO'ers differ from Generation Einstein on nearly every aspect described by Boschma and Groen. The only considerable degree of correlation is on the level of sociability and the importance of family and friends. VMBO'ers and MBO'ers are less internet and media savvy than Generation Einstein, and are less able to judge information and information sources critically; they are interested in certain social issues, but do not in general take an interest in world problems, unlike Generation Einstein; they find advertising irritating but admit to being easily persuaded to buy new products and VMBO'ers and MBO'ers are on the whole less confident and more wary about the future than Generation Einstein.

Conclusions:

Generation Einstein is worth reading, even if the only thing you get out of it is that the positive approach to the youth of today might be worth a try. But where it fails to convince me that the Generation Einstein profile fits with the majority of today's youth, the book does provide insights into the professional world of communicating with young people and reconfirms our worst nightmare about the modern world of consumerism and excessive individualism. The authors are communications professionals who offer no critique of the way in which businesses prey on young people as consumers. On the contrary, their claims about media smart Generation Einstein condone consumerism, as long as companies are authentic and do their best to connect to the target group. Boschma and Groen argue that Generation Einstein cannot be compartmentalized into handy segments, yet proceed to provide us with a relatively generalized view of what a whole generation is supposed to be like. The exaggerated descriptions are clever, and perfectly convey the message this book wants to get across: the onus is on us adults to understand and accept young people. Implicitly this means of course that we have the capacity to influence them and to sell them more products. They, Generation Einstein, are who they are, a product of a complex society in which consumerism and individualism are the highest goods. Consumerism isn't bad, it's a fact of life.

I leave you with the words of Robbie Williams from his song "Come Undone" which illustrates the ugly side of our "Big-I society" perfectly:

"They're selling razor blades and mirrors in the street; Pray that when I'm coming down you'll be asleep; If I ever hurt you your revenge will be so sweet; Because I'm scum; I'm your son; I come undone".

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