Understanding Generation Z Students to Promote a Contemporary Learning Environment

Kathleen A. J. Mohr
kathleen.mohr@usu.edu

Eric S. Mohr
eric.mohr@usu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/jete

Part of the Educational Methods Commons, and the Higher Education Commons

Utah State University
MERRILL-CAZIER LIBRARY

Understanding Generation Z Students to Promote a Contemporary Learning Environment

By Kathleen A. J. Mohr, Ed. D. and Eric S. Mohr, Ph.D.
Utah State University

Abstract

These groups have been characterized both positively and negatively in the popular press. A fresh understanding of the newer generations can help instructors better meet current students' educational needs. This article shares brief generational profiles based on recent research and then presents questions and recommendations for improving course assignments and their effectiveness. Ways of communicating about assignments and their benefits are also shared. The goal is to equip college-level instructors with ways to relate to and support the newest generation of learners.

Introduction

In order to make the most of academic opportunities, novice and veteran university instructors must consider the dispositions and needs of their students. Effective instructors often invest significant effort to understand, teach, and support their students who seem younger (and perhaps more "foreign") each year. Most active university faculty are Baby Boomers and Generation-Xers (a.k.a. Busters) who are now teaching primarily Gen-Y and -

Z undergraduate students. Bridging the possible divide between older and younger generations can be stimulating and affords an opportunity to rethink who current students are and what they need and want as learners.

Born after World War II and before 1980, the Baby Boomers and Busters may have experienced the youth-driven counter culture of the 1960s, but have since constituted a large and extended work force that is seen as adaptable, resourceful, and pragmatic (Tolbize, 2008). Ideally, these characteristics can equip university faculty of these generations to alter their instruction and accommodate their younger students. Knowing more about their incoming students is one way to do so.

Two Recent Publications to Help Understand Contemporary Students

Recent publications describe the younger generations and their dispositions about life and learning. In his book, *Generation iY: Our Last Chance to Save Their Future* (2010), Tim Elmore describes Millennials—the Y-Generation—as "the most diverse and eclectic in our nation's history, as well as the most protected and observed" (p. 19). He also contends that they are overwhelmed, overconnected, overprotected, and overserved. Elmore is a Gen-Xer and founder/president of Growing Leaders, an Atlanta-based nonprofit organization created to develop emerging leaders (*www.growingleaders.com*). Elmore's book posits that Generation iY—late Millennials who have grown up with the Internet—have "so much to offer, but they need direction [from] mentors who engage them in a relevant way, channel their energy, and provide them with the challenges they need" (p. 18). To help readers understand Generation iY, Elmore also places them in a sequence with the four previous generations to demonstrate how they are different. The table below (adapted from Elmore, 2010) depicts the last few generations of Americans. Interestingly, he depicts Millennials as optimistic about their futures by seeing life as a smorgasbord of choices, but their confidence and energy have been challenged by recent economic downturns that have contributed to "quarterlife

crises" for many who move back in with their parents around age 25 (Robbins & Wilner, 2001).

In a more recent publication, *Generation Z Goes to College* (2016), Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace synthesize research and information from various fields to profile Gen-Z student characteristics. Seemiller describes herself as a Gen-Xer employed as a higher education administrator and faculty member in the organizational leadership program at Wright State University. Grace is a Millennial and new-member orientation director for the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity. These authors conducted a study of Gen-Z youth to help employers and instructors consider ways to connect with the newest young adults. Seemiller and Grace posit that Gen Z is the most diverse generation yet. Often labeled Digital Natives, current 18-20 year-olds are also known as Ebay babies and "information curators" resorting to their Google Reflex to interpret the world. Interestingly, rather than the "me-centric" spirit attributed by some to Millennials, the Z Generation is considered more "we-centric."

Table 1. Comparison of Recent Generations

Perspective	Gen X—Busters	Gen Y—Millennials	Gen Z—Digital Natives
Birth Years	1965-1980	1981-1994	1995-2010
Life Paradigm	Relate to me	Life is a cafeteria	Make a difference
View of Authority	Ignore them	Choose them	Work with them
View of Relationships	Central, caring	24/7	Collaboration, resolution
Value System	Media	Shop Around	Open-minded
View of Career	Irritant	Place to serve	Place to solve problems
View of Technology	Enjoy it	Employ it	Live it
View of Future	Hopeless	Optimistic	Solve it!

The Emerging Academic Profile of Gen Z

Seemiller and Grace (2016) report that these Digital Natives comprise the dominant generation of students currently entering college. In their study, Gen-Zers described themselves as loyal, thoughtful, compassionate, open-minded, and responsible—a rather affable self-description. As evident in Table 2's comparison of Generations Y and Z, however, these latest students seem somewhat conflicted. For example, while wanting to show compassion, they admit to being critical of their peers. Further, they identify as entrepreneurial, but do not see themselves as creative. They also report being excited, yet fearful, about the future. Of particular interest to university faculty, Gen Z students show less preference for working with others, while suffering from Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) anxiety (Strong, 2016). Such paradoxical insights might foster a review of how instructors use class time and assign collaborative projects with their incoming freshmen.

Table 2: Descriptive Comparison of Generations Y and Z

iYs/Millennials		Generation Z	
Me Generation	Self-Interested	Responsible	Not Spontaneous
High Expectations	Entitled	Open-Minded	Not Conservative
Optimistic	Over-Confident	Thoughtful	Not Focused
Educated	Connected	Loyal	Not Competitive
Introspective	Ambiguous	Entrepreneurial	Not Creative
Parent-Supported	Trophied	Compassionate	Critical of Peers
Tolerant	Unstructured	Interactive	FOMO

As characterized by Seemiller and Grace, Digital Natives seek to be change-agents and believe in making a difference. This goal can be a challenge to achieve, if they generally actually prefer to work alone and lack creativity. Essentially, university educators may need to help Gen-Z students reconcile these possible conflicts as they negotiate higher-education experiences. For example, they may need guidance and options when asked to work with others. They also admit to feeling overwhelmed by the availability of information and

need help in evaluating it. Consequently, college instructors may need to narrow sources of information that students are to use to complete coursework.

Seemiller and Grace's description of contemporary college-going freshmen is generally positive. Perhaps most compelling is that these students report desiring an education that prepares them for a meaningful career. They apparently are interested in lifestyle-change challenges and appreciate standards. They want to know what competencies are expected in their aspired professions and appreciate professional checklists of what to know and able to do. These positive attributes could contribute to a willingness to learn.

Adjusting Our Assignments and Communication Techniques for Gen Z

The balance of this discussion will focus on two objectives for university faculty working with Gen-Z students: to consider possible revisions of key course assignments and to encourage discourse that can communicate a productive perspective toward coursework that matters.

A starting point is to consider which current course assignments seem to work well with today's students. Although instructors make some assignment decisions to enhance efficiency, ease grading, or keep students engaged, another goal should be to equip students with the skills and attitudes that will enable them to function in work-related roles in the future. Apparently, Gen-Z students prefer flipped courses and rely on YouTube as a primary source of self-instruction (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Because they see themselves as problem-solvers, who prefer to work alone, they may appreciate jigsaw formats in which individual students seek information online to contribute specific elements to a larger project. However, perhaps due to their 24/7 access to what is happening in the world, they are less interested in current events. The challenge, therefore, is to devise shared projects to which individual students contribute portions, while focusing on problems that they face personally. Some examples include the following: planning a healthier lifestyle, making

improvements in community services, and engaging in programs that support less-advantaged populations.

Digital Natives have grown up in the Information Age and while comfortable with technology to access the plethora of news bits and sound bites, they might need guidance in how to sift, sort, and synthesize information with help in avoiding overload, checking accuracy, and evaluating information. Many youth have succumbed to binge watching of favorite shows and instructors may not understand or identify how current students can get caught up in, or lost on, the Internet. Assignments that require students to access information online should be very clear as to goals, sources, time-spent, ways to glean and evaluate the content. Providing strict guidelines for online searching and viewing and segmented assignments could help students avoid the binge mentality that can cause them to consume time and lose focus.

Assignments: Promoting Appeals and Countering Pitfalls

Typically, university faculty employ discussions and reflections on reading assignments, quizzes or tests on course content, presentations or projects to evidence application of knowledge, and papers that require synthesis of information. Some faculty also make using technology in combination with the common assignments a priority. Another, increasingly popular option, is to incorporate service learning as a requirement. It may be worthwhile to rethink standard or major assignments as a way to appeal and support modern students. We provide here some beginning questions for revising course assignments:

1. What about successful assignments appeals to students? Can these aspects be highlighted and maximized?
2. Does the assignment allow students to explore career applications or ways to make a difference in the community?
3. Does technology support determining trustworthy sources and using information in a productive manner?

4. Can expectations for collaboration be guided or altered for those who prefer or need direction to work alone?
5. Does the timetable support students' completion of segments that contribute to a larger whole while avoiding binging to get it done?

It turns out that some course-evaluation forms request student assessment of what are considered 21st century objectives and in alignment with Gen-Z priorities. Examples could include: Learning to apply course materials (to improve rational thinking, problem solving, and decisions); Learning how to find and use resources for answering questions or solving problems; and Developing a clearer understanding of, and commitment to, personal values. These objectives can be used to refine assignments and highlighted in the course syllabus to communicate a more contemporary approach to learning.

To avoid some of the paradoxes and pitfalls described above, we share these additional recommendations for faculty working to improve course assignments:

- Give choices and a sense of freedom, if possible, but be willing to provide examples and give guidance. For example, students can be given instructions to show how ways to motivate others (e. g., granting choice, control, collaboration, challenge, creativity) is evident in a lesson plan or team project and argue for which element might be most impactful.
- Explain how assignments could help students to make a difference in their lives and the communities. For instance, students can be expected to consider both immediate and long-term benefits of conservation or recycling initiatives.
- Be more purposeful in assigning group tasks. Carefully explain the rationale for working in teams or groups, what the individual responsibilities are, and how they will be consolidated into a whole to solve a problem. Collaborating online before meeting in person might help students prepare for strong group participation.

- Require students to combine skills and strategies to propose a change that they could enact. An example is making a poster to argue for a new law and writing a letter to a legislator as a more personal plea.
- Promote informational literacy. Help students select and critically consume online resources. Point out more reliable sources and model how to analyze, summarize, and synthesize the content. Consider having students search for appropriate sites and sources for information as a first step, and then follow up with comparing the sites to determine which two provide the most reliable and unbiased information. These tasks could be due at different times and evaluated separately.
- If possible, leverage aspects of "destiny assignments" to frame tasks. According to Fandom, an entertainment news website for updates on films, games and television series, one power available in some online games is to assign and re-assign the destinies of another or oneself. Thus, a destiny assignment is the power to manipulate or re-assign the fate of a character. Searching the terms *destiny assignment* and *prosperity* and *purpose* reveals a full-blown movement in support of personal development that interests young adults. Assignments that challenge students to initiate and document change in themselves and others or that envision their future-selves might have long-lasting appeal.

Some Ways to "Talk the Walk" with Contemporary Students

Obviously, Gen-Y and -Z students can quickly resent assignments that are viewed as "busy work" or mundane. The recommendations above contribute to making assignments personal, relevant, and long-lasting. Thus, as Seemiller and Grace (2016) suggest, the way instructors frame the relevance of assignments might be more important than ever. In other words, instructors should carefully explain the rationale and value of assignments, highlighting

how a task or project helps students learn what will be necessary in the workplace or life beyond college. Essentially, astute instructors can Talk the Talk about Walking the Walk. Here are some comments that university educators could use to promote course assignments:

1. "You'll need this on the job."
2. "We're here to equip you to make real differences in your life and that of others."
3. "Professionals in this field need to know and apply these essential concepts."
4. "Knowing how to do this will help you make important decisions on the job."
5. "I know that you probably don't want to let others down, so pay attention to this."
6. "I want to help you be the best you can be."
7. "This task may be challenging, but it can be well worth your effort."

Summary: Primary Recommendations for a Contemporary Learning Environment

The recommendations presented above are trifold. University instructors are encouraged to learn more about their students and their values as college-level learners. Secondly, instructors should review their major assignments to consider ways to increase their value and appeal to students. Thirdly, instructors may want to audit the way they talk about their planned educational experiences and promote them as beneficial to students and their futures. Any one of these efforts could ameliorate less relevant classroom learning environments, but a combination could invigorate undergraduate courses for both teachers and students.

In a recent presentation, "Engaging Generation Z Students," Vickie Cook (2015) confirms that Gen-Z post-secondary students tend to desire frequent educational opportunities that use technology and visual media. She adds that

they also often desire relevant, solution-oriented relationships with their mentors and peers but need guidance to respond to contemporary challenges. Experienced faculty understand, however, that meeting students where they are may not always be easy or comfortable. Indeed, "keeping it fresh" and "real" is an ongoing endeavor. Rather than negatively stereotype new students and their learning behaviors, therefore, faculty should consider generational differences that might hinder or help the teaching-learning dynamic and respond more positively. As Elmore admonishes, the older generation (of faculty) must mentor and challenge the next generation of adults (current college-aged students). This challenge can include using updated course assignments and communicating more productively about the work that university faculty expect Digital Natives to complete in an effort to prepare these Gen-Z students for their fast-approaching professional lives.

References

Cook, V. (2015). Engaging Generation Z Students. *Center for Online Learning Research and Service, University of Illinois Springfield.* Retrieved from https://sites.google.com/a/uis.edu/colrs_cook/home/engaging-generation-z-students

Elmore, T. (2010). *Generation iY: Our last chance to save their future.* Atlanta, GA: Poet Gardener.

Robbins, A. & Wilner, A. (2001). *The Quarterlife Crisis: The unique challenges of life in your twenties.* New York, NY: Tarcher.

Seemiller, C., & Grace, M. (2016). *Generation Z Goes to College.* New York, NY: Jossey-Bass.

Strong, R. (2016). Social media, FOMO and the perfect storm for the Quarter-Life Crisis. Retrieved at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rebecca-strong/social-media-fomo-and-the_b_9880170.html

Tolbize, A. (2008). *Generational differences in the workplace.* Retrieved from http://rtc.umn.edu/docs/2_18_Gen_diff_workplace.pdf

About the Authors

Kathleen (Kit) Mohr is an associate professor of language and literacy in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership at Utah State University, where she is also currently serving as Director of Graduate Programs. Kit was an elementary school teacher 15 years before moving to higher education to pursue research focused on accelerating the social and academic progress of English language learners. Her current research uses mixed methodologies to explore integrating and stacking research-recommended practices in sophisticated ways to support student achievement. Kit has been at USU for five years and is actively seeking to better understand and challenge contemporary students and teachers.

Eric Mohr is an associate professor of professional practice in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership at Utah State University. For the first 20 years of his career, Eric taught rhetorical and literary analysis to university students. Subsequently, Eric sojourned as a secondary English Language Arts teacher for 10 years before re-entering higher education, but this time to assist secondary preservice teachers with strategies for strengthening reading and writing practices in all classrooms. Eric has been at USU for the last five years and desires to engage contemporary students and teachers even more effectively.