

Tech Snacks: Gen Z in the Classroom

The range of years that encompass a generation varies depending on the source, but most peg the “Millennial generation” as being born in the years between the early 1980s and the early 1990s. A 19-year-old college freshman today would have been born in 2002, a generational cohort that falls outside the Millennial range. It takes time to settle on a popularly accepted name for generational cohorts, but for now many sources are calling this younger group “Generation Z.”

What are they like?

Studies¹ have found some interesting trends that set Gen Z apart from previous generations. The purpose of this discussion is not to group students together under their generational stereotypes, but to present some general ideas and realities that many Gen Z students face. These realities have implications for students’ learning styles and the ways in which we might teach and communicate with them.

Hesitant about open-ended or creative work — When surveyed, many Gen Z students said that they don’t consider themselves to be very creative or imaginative. This trend in self-perception may stem from the high level of achievement that they see portrayed in social media; from having more “hands-on” parenting than earlier generations had; or even from K-12 experiences that emphasized standardized testing and STEM subjects over art, social studies, and humanities.

→ If students have had few prior opportunities for developing creativity, they may struggle with their own confidence when it comes to creative-thinking and problem-solving prompts in the college classroom.² Be clear up front about your process, but let students struggle a bit with answers and work their way through them before you provide the solution. Don’t always spell out every step of a project — let them explore their options and give more detailed guidance only when needed. This helps them practice creativity and problem solving skills.

Goal driven — As a whole, Gen Z tends to be more goal/career driven. This means that they like to have a purpose for what they do and any activities or assignments you might give them in class. If they have a purpose for their work, they can envision how it applies to their overall goal (for many, that might be graduating college).

→ Gen Z students tend to want to earn their degree and get a job as efficiently and cheaply as possible and are turned off by what they perceive as “busywork.” It may sometimes be helpful to pause and explain why a subject or procedure is useful and relevant, and how activities and assignments relate to larger learning objectives and the deeper learning process within a discipline.

Risk averse — Gen Z’s formative years are bookended by two touchstones: 9/11 and the Great Recession. They have grown up in a world shaped by mass shootings and helicopter parents, as well as a time of major economic, political, and social change.

¹ Seemiller, C., & Grace, M. (2016). *Generation Z Goes to College*.

² Northern Illinois University Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning. (2020). *Generation Z. Instructional guide for university faculty and teaching assistants*.

Gen Z is less likely to believe in “The American Dream” than any previous generation since World War 2 and are generally less optimistic than Millennials.

- Many Gen Z students shut down in the face of failure or negative feedback. Instructors need to be explicit in defining failure as an opportunity for reflection and improvement and need to actively cultivate growth mindset mentalities.

Open about mental health — According to Western Governors University, only 45% of Gen Z individuals say their mental health is good.³ Gen Z students are more prone to depression, online bullying, and a surprising array of psychological problems. They tend to be more open about mental health, which means that even though they are more likely to experience mental health issues, they are also more likely to report it.

- If you’re concerned that a student is having mental health issues, you can share your concern on the C.A.R.E. Report system, accessible from the Faculty & Staff page on msun.edu.

Smartphones have changed their lives

Generation Z members communicate with their friends via their phones far more than previous cohorts and likely hang out in-person a lot less.⁴ They grew up surrounded by evolving technology and have likely never gone to school without access to the internet. They are used to instant communication and social media and are less familiar with communicating via email or in-person than previous generations.

What does this mean for me as a teacher?

We aren’t saying that you need to dumb down your curriculum and spoon-feed these students. However, there are some considerations we need to start thinking about to help this cohort be more successful in higher education and in the workforce.

Scaffold large projects — Checkpoints and required drafts for large projects give students the sense that their work is a process that takes time, effort, and attention to feedback. Scaffolding also allows them to make small mistakes or “failures” in low-stakes situations. In this social media age, students constantly see “end results” (i.e., the achievements of others) without being shown the setbacks and challenges involved along the way. It is important to use your course format to reinforce the sense that learning is about process just as much as an end-product. Project scaffolding is also an effective method for decreasing cheating, plagiarism, and paper-buying — it forces students to “show their work.”

Incorporate formative assessment — When lecturing, stop every 10-15 minutes to test student knowledge with an informal quiz, a problem-solving activity, live-polling, or another exercise that allows them to practice the information or process you’re teaching. Always follow up the assessment with clear corrective feedback so the students know whether their answer is right or wrong and can ask questions accordingly.

Communicate boundaries — Gen Z wants to be constantly connected and is accustomed to immediate feedback and answers to their questions. They literally sleep with their phones. It’s a good idea to incorporate a “communication policy” into your syllabus that addresses what they can expect from you in terms of response time and gives clear expectations about how you want them to communicate with you.

³ Western Governors University. (2019). *Stress, mental health, and Generation Z*.

⁴ Twenge, J. M. (2017, September). Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation? *The Atlantic*.