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# Rethinking Learning Engagement with Gen Z Students

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*This paper examines how some expectations of Generation Z students impact faculty approaches to teaching within classrooms, both online and on campus. Methodologically, this paper relies on a literature review of various aspects of this relatively new topic, as well as participatory observation. Heutagogy is the guiding theoretical learning framework. The paper takes the form of an executive report and is addressed primarily to instructional leaders.*

## Introductory Remarks

Understanding the generalizable characteristics that each generation of students brings to the classroom, as well as their individual strengths and challenges, results in an ongoing need for instructors who are able to implement high impact practices in their teaching. As with all students, the most important attitude that the faculty can bring to the classroom is respect for students of all ages and at all stages. This is vital, since it is unlikely that classroom groups will comprise homogeneously aged students.

This paper explores an approach born out in the theory of heutagogy (Hase and Kenyon, 2001). Heutagogy is one aspect within the continuum of learning theories. As this learning theory is related to self-determined learning, it follows the premises of pedagogy and andragogy. The practices of heutagogy allow students to remain in control and to become self-determined learners by approaching their learning needs through a self-determined lens (Blaschke, 2012). This approach is significant when used in relation to mobile learning devices and how these devices may be used in the classroom.

The categories of learning theory as they appear on a continuum of learning may be best defined as:

- 1) pedagogy is the art and science of traditional age learners,
- 2) andragogy focuses on the learning theory of adult learners,
- 3) heutagogy is best described as self-determined learning.

A significant premise of the heutagogical approach is to utilize mobile learning opportunities to build social constructivist approaches to learning that enable learners to learn anywhere. Learning is no longer constrained by location or time. Teaching relates to a co-constructivist approach that allows members of the learning community to learn from and to teach each other. Additionally, the mobile device being used is chosen with the purposeful intention that is specific to the learning community and allows the learner to connect seamlessly with the content, teachers, and fellow students (Gerstein, 2013). This framework built upon the learning theory of heutagogy aligns well with the expectations of Generation Z (Gen Z) students.

## Gen Z Students – Strengths

Learning behaviors for students today are impacted by the use of digital media and devices. This is especially true for students who were born between 1995 and 2012, a generation referred to as Gen Z. Technology has changed the personal lives of students, the work lives of teachers, how individuals learn, when individuals learn, and how the use of technology is perceived in everyday situations. Learning anytime and anywhere is a result of ubiquitous technology (Gerstein, 2013). The challenge related to the use of devices in learning is that many students know how to utilize functional applications such as text messaging, gaming, and social media, but do not know how to effectively learn using mobile devices. It is inherent when utilizing a heutagogical approach to learning that Gen Z students are taught how to harness the power of the mobile device in relation to its application in learning.

There are several positive characteristics of Gen Z students. They bring high expectations into their learning environments. They value social justice and are looking for ways to impact the world around them. They are pragmatic in their approach to learning and to life. These students have been less sheltered from

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the harsh economic realities that have assaulted their families than previous generations. They understand that the world is not always fair and they are not afraid to work hard to achieve what they wish to accomplish (Stansbury, 2017). Teachers can seek connections between the positive characteristics of Gen Z students to build upon these characteristics to inspire the learning of new concepts and skills.

However, teachers often only focus on the ability of Gen Z students to single-mindedly pour themselves into their digital worlds. Their ability to have digital relationships and digital communications on higher levels than previous generations can cause consternation and inhibit the understanding of how to effectively teach this generation. One author termed this generation “phigital” (Stansbury, 2017). The definition of phigital is used to describe the phenomena of living in both the physical and digital world interchangeably. While individuals who have incorporated devices into their daily and work activities may lean toward a phigital philosophy in both their work world and personal lives. Gen Z students truly display a seamless interchange between the physical and digital environments. These students do not stop to think about posting a photo of a special event to friends, they just do it. These students do not stop to think about reaching out to others who are part of their digital social network for information and advice, they just do it. The physical and digital worlds of Gen Z do not collide, they meld completely. Learning through the Gen Z lens is different and requires alternative approaches to learning (Rosen, 2010). By considering the framework of a heutagogical or self-determining approach to learning, teachers can assist Gen Z students in their need for this alternative approach to learning.

Additionally, the days of starting a class (whether online or on campus) a few minutes late or with an ambivalent opening do not resonate well with Gen Z students. Researchers have indicated the Gen Z students must be attracted by a message within 8–10 seconds or they shift their focus to a different input of information, which might be physical or digital (Fong, 2018). Being disorganized in either a face to face or online learning environment will certainly limit the amount of time a Gen Z student will spend on content or listening to a lecture.

Gen Z students are highly creative and deeply pragmatic. They have the ability to be curious young scholars who seek solutions to the problems they see around the world. They have the ability and the desire to make significant impacts on the world in which they live. They are looking for instructors who are not afraid of using technology, with its strengths and its weaknesses, to find new solutions to real problems.

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### **Gen Z Students – the Learning Moments**

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Gen Z students struggle in various areas of socialization. Skills related to career and workplace expectations are critical for students today. Of these,

those often referred to as “soft skills” are also necessary for the success of the student. They include the ability to make appropriate introductions, the art of the handshake, and appropriate ways to express conflicting ideas in a collegial manner. These skills are important for this generation of students to master as they move toward the workplace. Assignments that relate to building stronger socialization skills through experiential learning or interviewing techniques can assist them in building the socialization skills needed for workplace success. This generation of students highly prizes the opportunity for experiential learning in real-world environments (Twenge, 2017). This concept is also supportive of the heutagogical connection to a self-determined learning approach. By focusing on the learner’s capacity, a teacher may design experiential assignments that promote a highly autonomous approach to developing the learning outcomes and associated skills of a course.

As Gen Z students have a tremendous reliance on technology, this ubiquitous technology should be quite prevalent in classroom assignments (Jenkins, 2019). Technologies may be utilized for the following functions:

- finding information,
- connecting to human and data networks,
- finding solutions to problems,
- building skills in the arts and humanities through virtual travel,
- visiting distant lands, museums, and other places they are unlikely to be able to visit through augmented and virtual reality.

However, other approaches that include learning strong sets of problem solving skills while limiting the use of technology is also a skill that should be planned well into appropriate activities, to strengthen critical thinking through means outside of technology (Aoun, 2017)). According to Aoun, technical skills are important for this generation to learn and understand, but equally important are conceptual skills, interpersonal skills, and the ability to understand what makes human beings uniquely human.

Strengthening activities that focus on building oral and written communication skills is most appropriate for Gen Z students. While these students communicate at a very high level with peers through acronyms and symbols, the ability to utilize written words and to develop high level speaking abilities is one that Gen Z students will have difficulty constructing without specific activities in the classroom that encourage this skill set. One excellent example of this might be found in the activity of creating student written and produced video. For video work to be done well requires high level thinking and creativity, even for a 3–7-minute video assignment with a script and a practiced delivery. This simple activity, when done well, can provide a self-determined multimedia approach to encouraging written and oral speech skill-building. The skills learned in this type of

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exercise enhance the ability of the student to build strong workplace skills (Gurchiek, 2016).

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## Recommendations

While it is easy to conclude that Gen Z students feel entitled, they do not exhibit the same level of entitlement that the millennial generation did. They do want instant gratification related to finding answers to basic problems (Wilkie, 2017). Gen Z students are also significantly less collaborative than their previous millennial counterparts. They seek ways to assert their individuality while working within a larger group; this is aimed at empowering an organizational culture toward making an impact. Professors who focus on ways to encourage individuality within the coursework, including group work and ways for each individual to bring their own creativity and ability to build on autonomous learning to the course room, will find students who engage with the learning activities and eager to excel.

In concluding, the author proposes three questions for the instructor to consider when planning a course activity:

1. Are the students allowed to determine how to expand learning through using technology as part of the lesson plan?
2. Are the students finding pathways toward self-determined learning through heutagogical practices in the class?
3. Is device neutrality practiced to allow students to choose the device and app that most effectively works for them to prove they have met the learning outcomes?

To sum up, teaching this generation of students requires the faculty to find new ways to think about content, activities, and assessments. Teaching this generation of students will require that instructors consider self-determined, autonomous heutagogical methods that allow the students to utilize creativity and self-directedness in their learning journey. Choosing a heutagogical approach will move the instructor from the center of the learning process to the side, as a coach or mentor, while the student moves to the center of the learning process. An active respect for generational differences should always be present, but none more so than when integrating the use of technology in the learning activity. In regard to Gen Z students, educators should engage them through building mutual respect, sharing scholarship

and best practices surrounding technology usage in learning, and sharing the responsibility of learning with the students.

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## Abstract

Hase and Kenyon (2001) explored the learning theory of heutagogy along the continuum of learning theories. Heutagogy provides a framework for self-determined learning and follows the continuum created through the theories of pedagogy and andragogy. However, the practice of heutagogy allows students to remain in control of their learning through the application of self-determined learning. This approach is significant when used in relation to mobile learning devices. This theory is highly relevant in considering how to best provide learning for Gen Z students, born between 1995 and 2012. This paper suggests there are benefits in exploring Gen Z student learning through a heutagogical application.

**Keywords:** heutagogical learning, generation Z, mobile learning, co-constructivism, self-determined learning



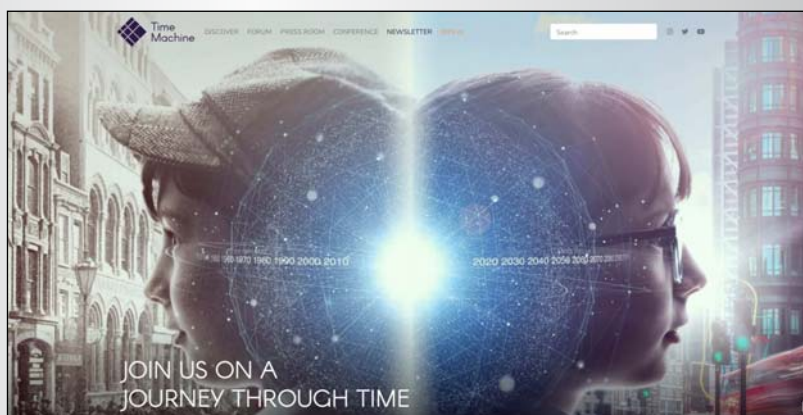
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## WE RECOMMEND

### Time Machine Europe

#### Unlock the rich past of our cities

The Time Machine Project is by far the most ambitious and far-reaching project ever undertaken using Big Data of the Past. Revolutionizing the way we experience European history and culture, the project is an international collaboration to build a map of European history that spans thousands of years. This open access, living resource will aid everyone from acade-



tics to industry, sparking interest in the future generation of humanities scholars, pushing the limits of science and technology, and allowing the general public to explore their own past. The project got funding in 2018 from Horizon 2020 – the European Union research and innovation programme, but actually the local time machine projects started several years ago.

#### Meet the local time machines

The Venice Time Machine was the first project developed by Frédéric Kaplan from the Digital Humanities Laboratory at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL). He had the ambition to capture well over 1,000 years of records in dynamic digital form, encompassing the glorious era of the Most Serene Republic of Venice. Kilometers of archives were digitized, transcribed and indexed, forming the largest database of Venetian documents ever created.

Now, the network of Local Time Machines comprises 17 projects across Europe, including Paris, Amsterdam, Antwerp and Utrecht, Barcelona, Budapest, Ghent/Bruges, Limburg, Dresden, Nuremberg, Venice and Naples, Sion, and one in Jerusalem. More information at <https://www.timemachine.eu>

