


COMMENTARY

Putting Gen Z first: Educating with a generational mind-set

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Kath et al. (2021) encouraged readers to make evidence-based changes to their teaching based on industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology research. We expand on their discussion by recommending that educators not only integrate evidence-based practices into their teaching but also take a generational approach to create learning environments that are best suited to the characteristics of the students who are in them. We begin by discussing the academic and professional needs of the current generation of learners (i.e., Generation Z [Gen Z], students born roughly between 1995 and 2015, although the end date is not agreed upon), then discuss the value of educators' adapting a generational mind-set. We conclude by presenting an interdisciplinary experiential learning experience as a case study. This experience exemplifies several suggestions from the focal article and updated approaches that are focused on Gen Z learners, and we hope it can illustrate a tangible exercise through which educators can achieve the goals advanced by Kath et al. and enhance learning for a Gen Z audience.

Gen Z learners

When designing curricula, we argue it is important to understand the characteristics of those who are going to consume the content and tailor educational practices accordingly. Gen Z (also known as “zoomers”) learners, who are currently between the ages of 5 and 25, will be the majority university learner population for the next 15 years and are projected to make up over one third of the workforce by 2030 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). We have already witnessed universities and organizations previously adapting to the needs of the preceding Millennial generation (e.g., increasing engagement through relationship management, spotlighting well-being), and it is now time to focus on the next generation of learners and workers by first ensuring that their undergraduate experiences adapt to promote their personal and professional development.

To do so, we must begin by understanding Gen Z students, their backgrounds, and what they want out of an education. These true “digital natives” are unlikely to have any memory of life before the ubiquity of the smartphone (Parker & Igielnik, 2020), essentially taking technology and universal data access for granted. In their comprehensive study presented in the book *Generation Z Goes to College*, Seemiller and Grace (2016) note that members of Gen Z have less experience with sex, drinking, and drugs than do their predecessors, and are more likely to be educated. They further describe that many Gen Z learners have been raised to trust that they will be taken care of in educational contexts (e.g., via “no child left behind”) and believe that hierarchies are passé, instead favoring the development of personal relationships regardless of status

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(e.g., everyone is connected with a dashed line in an organizational chart). Gen Z students also approach their college searches with a practical mind-set, attentive to value and relevance, and they are looking for more integration of their academic and practical experiences. Indeed, almost 80% of recently surveyed Gen Z learners noted the critical importance of an undergraduate curriculum that includes real-world activities such as internships and practicum (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). This is not surprising given that zoomers are less likely to have early working experiences (e.g., jobs in high school or college) than are previous generations (Parker & Igielnik, 2020).

Further diverging from previous generations, Gen Z favors an educational experience that blends online and face-to-face instruction, independent and group work, and the liberal arts with professional skills training—all with immersive elements and an experiential bent. Gen Z learners seek project-based learning and undergraduate research opportunities to hone crucial, marketable skills and are also more data-driven and hungrier for feedback than their predecessors (Schroth, 2019). It is thus clear that Gen Z wants a multimodal, interdisciplinary experience in college that they can immediately apply to the real world once they graduate. Meeting these needs through curricular updates will better prepare these students for their real-world roles and also potentially serve as a catalyst for evolution and growth in ourselves as educators.

A (Second) call to action

We echo Kath et al.'s (2021) challenge “to actually change something about the way you teach I-O psychology to undergraduates” and appreciate the notion that “there should be no guilt in starting small.” In that spirit, we posit that the first seemingly small, but actually large, change that we can make as educators is to adjust our own mind-sets to align more closely with those of our Gen Z learners. We should try to see life and learning through their eyes, their experiences, and through their expectations of their education and how these feed into their longer term professional and personal life goals.

Kath et al. (2021) emphasize the critical importance of “getting to know your students” and offer easy suggestions for doing so (e.g., learning names, forming relationships); yet, this can also be accomplished at a higher level to learn more about Gen Z learners as a group. Learning more about these learners as a group can help supplement the knowledge that is gained from interactions with individual students and inform expectations about overarching preferences, learning needs, and areas of growth that should be incorporated into the curriculum one is designing. As our careers as educators progress, it is humbling yet critical to acknowledge that the age gap between ourselves and our students is ever widening. We must not forget that although our students' ages remain relatively static, their experiences, needs, priorities, and preferences most definitely do not.

Thus, as educators seek to delve into the rich body of literature on best practices for teaching and learning, we propose that they do so in the context of the goals and learning objectives that are most valued by Gen Z learners. That is, we posit that efforts to (re)design curricula must consider the research evidence about educational activities and research evidence about the audience in tandem and that merging both offers a greater opportunity to enhance educational experiences for Gen Z students. Beyond the summary offered above, we encourage readers to dive deeper into any of the popular press titles focused on Gen Z, education, and work (e.g., Seemiller & Grace, 2016) to help further introduce a Gen Z learner's mind-set to the other changes you consider for your classroom.

Although many of the recommendations that are offered in the focal article are suitable for Gen Z learners, they may need to be adapted or clarified to better align with their experiences, needs, priorities, and preferences. For example, does creating a flipped classroom achieve the

Table 1. Gen Z Learner-Focused Examples

	Kath et al. (2021) example Recommendation	Gen Z learner-focused eco challenge example
Training and development	Explain how course content might be useful to students in the near future.	Explain the immediate positive influence that the process and results of the project may have on the students, their organization, and their community.
Diversity and inclusion	Create an assignment that asks students to take the perspective of a minority student/employee in an effort to cultivate tolerance.	Assess and discuss differences in coping and conflict management styles to facilitate conversations on individual needs and challenges that apply to the successful completion of the project.
Groups and teams	Encourage students to view development of teamwork skills as an explicit goal of the project.	Encourage students to view development of teamwork skills as the catalyst for maximizing the effectiveness of the project and its effects on the broader community.
Transformational leadership	Give more individualized feedback to students on their assignments, which can be done efficiently using well-designed rubrics.	Give data-driven feedback to students and include them in discussions and decisions about how and what to evaluate in order to promote success.

goals that are most valued by Gen Z students? Replacing time that would traditionally be devoted to lecturing with a series of practical, skill-building projects would likely be very effective, whereas substituting the time with less-structured group discussions and activities with no tangible output or concrete feedback may not. Likewise, is individualized feedback important, or do Gen Z learners desire more (quantity) data-driven feedback, perhaps comparing their performance with others' or to their own predefined goals? We don't propose to have all the answers but rather pose these questions to illustrate the type of thinking that educators can engage in to challenge what has worked in the past and ensure that it works for learners now and in the future.

We now conclude with a brief case study to illustrate some of the recommendations from the focal article in action and how Gen Z learners have thrived in a purposefully designed experiential learning scenario.

A Case study: The eco challenge

The *Eco Challenge* is a semester-long cross-disciplinary applied leadership project, connecting teams of students from across our university to engage in defining and solving issues that are related to environmental sustainability. Although not formally part of an I-O psychology course curriculum, students from Management, Engineering, Communications, Finance, and Psychology majors enroll in discipline-specific courses and are then placed in cross-disciplinary teams for the challenge. Created specifically with Gen Z students in mind, the Eco Challenge exemplifies many of the recommendations that are offered by Kath et al. (2021), some of which have been restructured to specifically cater to Gen Z (see Table 1 for examples). Most centrally, although the stated mission of the Eco Challenge is to identify and solve issues that are related to environmental sustainability, its primary pedagogical goals are to teach students about group and team functioning, diversity and inclusion, and leadership—classic and critical I-O psychology topics. Importantly, the focus on sustainability was chosen based on feedback from Gen Z students, who desired an experience that aligned with both their emerging values and the trends and needs they themselves identified in potential future employers.

Eco Challenge student teams brainstorm sustainability issues that are relevant to the local community, determine which issue to focus on as a team, envision a solution to the problem, engage with external stakeholders to clarify their vision, and present a solution as a proactive proposal to a panel of experts who assess its quality. Early in each semester, interactive workshops on team dynamics and effectiveness, conflict management, internal and external (i.e., stakeholder) communication, and project management help to bridge knowledge and skill gaps between the various student backgrounds while simultaneously motivating them through a common superordinate goal. These components were designed for Gen Z students, a task that is primarily accomplished through iterating based on student ideas and feedback coupled with research evidence on the needs of Gen Z learners.

In addition to designing the tasks of the challenge with Gen Z in mind, we have also cultivated an assessment process to meet Gen Z learners' needs. We know that our Gen Z students want to see data and feedback regarding their professional development (e.g., Lanier, 2017), so we have ensured that this is part of the process. Most recently, pre- and post-Eco Challenge data show that students self-reported increased leadership skills, including applying leadership to practice, designing leadership roles, and constructing effective arguments; increased ability to define key issues and desired outcomes; and increased ability to effectively communicate with multiple diverse stakeholders. Upon completion of the challenge, we review and discuss these data-driven outcomes and goal progress with students to help them "see" their learning and development, better allowing them to communicate it to potential employers on the job market. Some students can further boast of the real-world results of their work. The university has chosen to fund and execute some of the teams' ideas (e.g., replacing a gas-powered utility vehicle fleet with electric models).

We also use the assessment data that we collect each semester to iterate and improve the Eco Challenge. Qualitative data have also reflected high student satisfaction with the Eco Challenge, helping solidify its long-term integration as a unique experiential learning component of our interdisciplinary curricula. Further, data from other stakeholders demonstrate the unique value of the Eco Challenge as both an excellent experience for students and one that benefits the faculty, who gain experience with teaching and leading students from other majors and coteaching and learning from other educators. The design and ultimate success of the Eco Challenge also assists our administrators, recruiters, and development officers to craft compelling narratives about the experience, its influence on the community, and the real-world marketability of the skills that students gain—all helpful in sustaining the program and reaching more students.

Conclusion

Kath et al. (2021) urge instructors to use evidence-based practices to design better, more evidence-based curricula for teaching I-O content, and we agree that this is tantamount to our success as educators. We also extend their discussion to raise the point that a curriculum is created to be consumed, and much like any other product, it should be developed with the specific consumer in mind. We call on educators to focus on the generational needs of their students, most of whom will be Gen Z for the foreseeable future, because doing so can enhance student learning, as well as our own. We also present a project that was specifically designed to meet the unique needs of Gen Z learners, and we encourage others to draw on and adapt these types of learning exercise for their own classes. Looking forward, Generation Alpha will be starting their undergraduate experiences as early as 2027 and will similarly require updated educational experiences tailored to their unique experiences, needs, priorities, and preferences. Thus, agility is key, and it is never too late to start adapting as educators, even in small ways. Doing so is the epitome of practicing what we preach.

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