

Engagement, inquiry and community: What are Gen Zs looking for in learning?

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"Speak to the youth and you will see your future." Is this a quote? If not, it should be.



One of the benefits of a year-end break is that, as a parent, you get to really engage with your children and their friends. If you ask the right questions and listen carefully, it's amazing what is revealed.

My nephew is a matriculant who recently received his results. He has chosen to take 2021 as a gap year – but his reason isn't the typical, "I don't know what I want to do," or "I'm just going to take a break for a year." His reason is that he wants to see what will happen to higher education in 2021, because he doesn't want to be 'stuck' in a system that will just offer him the same as 'what he got at school'.

Admittedly, he is a mature youth, and a sample size of one – and I'm quite certain that this is not the opinion of all teenagers. However, it does beg the question as to what higher education will offer this group of Generation Z students. They expect far more from these three or four years of their lives than simply being lectured on a subject that they could just as readily Google.

My nephew also believes that in 2021, universities will iron out their emergency remote teaching and learning (ERT/L) measures. The measures taken in 2020 will hopefully become more cohesive and purposeful this year, resulting in a learning experience that is designed explicitly for online or blended learning delivery.

So, what exactly do we, as learning designers, need to iron out?

Well, to start on this journey, we first need to ask ourselves a question: What does a South African Gen Z student expect from their courses and courseware at their chosen educational institution? We need to ask the right questions, and then really listen, so that we can identify what they need and want in their learning lives – and ultimately, design progressive learning experiences and iteratively test their effectiveness.

What has my cursory listening taught me about how Gen Zs live and ultimately learn?

We know that Gen Z students need to be *engaged*. The competition for an 18-year-old's time and attention is fierce. They have their school or university work competing with their sport; they have a bouquet of social media platforms, games and movies – let alone good old-fashioned face-to-face socialising. How can we expect them to allocate their precious time to their studies when there are so many other pastimes – which are potentially more engaging, enjoyable and rewarding – competing for their attention?

Our learning design needs to ensure that their studies are *engaging, enjoyable and rewarding*. And this applies to both the content and the platforms that facilitate teaching and learning in our remote, interconnected digital world. We can't reasonably expect them to engage with the status quo that was designed for past generations and a bygone way of life.

So, *how* do we engage them? Well, Gen Zs live in a digital world. There is a wealth of online content available in various media formats. But, in our learning design, we can't simply tell students to Google their economics course in first year. They first need to know *what they need to know*. They need concise, appropriate and relevant learning objectives to set boundaries for their studies. Then, they need quality content to achieve these learning objectives. So, once they know what they need to know, could we then unleash them on the Internet? Well, still no.

In higher education, content is the vehicle for critical thinking. It can't just be a 'content dump' or resource list that is uploaded to an online platform. It also can't be a simple textbook that delivers static text-based information. Rather, our learning design needs to curate *purposeful* multimedia-enriched and interactive content for knowledge transfer, inquiry and critical thinking. Inquiry and critical thinking are not solitary affairs. We don't inquire and think in a vacuum. We have conversations; we are social.

Gen Zs are highly digitally social. We know that they chat or direct message (DM) each other via apps like WhatsApp. But it seems that they are increasingly moving toward platforms like Instagram, which offer not just DMing but also 'stories' and posts. They also use Snapchat, where they communicate through photos and posts. Then, there's TikTok and YouTube for video-sharing and broadcasting conversations, as well as Houseparty, for group video conversations and games. There are myriad apps that offer mechanisms and tools for digital conversations.

We have conversations in community – and Gen Zs have greater potential to do so, because their communities have expanded through digitisation. Before the Internet revolution, communities existed largely in the first degree; that is, a community was a group of people within a certain geographic region, and with certain commonalities, who interacted with each other. Our communities were the people we knew as friends, colleagues and family. The term 'friends' was recontextualised by Facebook, which extended the geographic boundaries of communities.

But communities haven't only extended geographically; they have also extended socially. The Internet has brought about the concept of 'followers', as witnessed on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn etc. Communities now exist on numerous levels, with vast expansion in both number and geography. Most Gen Zs live and breathe through their online communities. From this perspective, our learning design needs to cater for these digital conversations in both smaller and broader communities. After all, this is how Gen Zs live. They need to inquire in their communities.

Let me illustrate by means of a story.

A certain Gen Z recently told me a story about a mild case of acne that she had developed. Her father, a doctor, simply prescribed regular face washing and creams. Her friend happened to watch a TikTok video, which showed a person of the same age with remarkably similar symptoms and promoted the use of anti-dandruff shampoo for fungal acne.

Her friend sent her the TikTok link, and the Gen Z researched it online. She then approached her father with her results, which he ratified, followed by a prescription for the shampoo. She used it – and the problem that she had been battling with quickly resolved.

This story is by no means advocating for the use of TikTok or Google as a replacement for medical professionals, nor is it suggesting that the doctor was necessarily incorrect. It simply serves to point out that problems are potentially solved

through inquiry, both through community and the vastness of the Internet.

This is how Edge Education designs programmes, content, learning systems, teaching and learning approaches, and more. We have crafted our digital CourseBook platform to incorporate a community-based approach to online education. It fosters interaction, debate, information-sharing and collaboration via the Community Chat Tool with reporting to monitor user engagement.

Because we understand our audience of Gen Z learners, we recognise that our learning design must be *engaging* – and if we are to create a purposeful, enriched learning experience that successfully draws them in and captures their interest, it must be able to foster inquiry, both individually and in smaller and broader communities.

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