
Teaching Generation Z: Student as Consumer, Teacher as Customer Servant

Relationships between teachers, students, and learning have changed rapidly since the turn of the century and the incoming of Generation Z into the educational system. Current tertiary students, who were born between the mid-late 90s and early 2000s came of age during a number of developments, which include increasingly more sophisticated information and communication technologies, shifting political landscapes and rapid consumerism. Social life and behaviours have changed drastically during the lifespan of this generation, and that extends to how they relate to authority. While authority in the classroom once resided exclusively with the teacher, Generation Z now requires an approach to authority that distributes the mechanisms of decision-making across the agencies present in the room, as students further access other sources of knowledge and skill acquisition via social media, and peer experience. Pulling together various factors influencing the outlook and expectations of Generation Z, this paper reflects on the roles and functions of the teacher and suggests modifications in curriculum design.

1 Social Media and Self-Comparison

Today, around 70% of Singaporeans spend an average of two and a half hours a day actively using social media.¹ It has been available for just over twenty years, which means that most young students grew up with it and cannot remember life without it. From an early age, Generation Z students have been influenced in a markedly different way to those born before the 1990s. The impact of mass and digital socialisation is significant because younger generations have become emotionally conditioned to new social emotional, and digital literacies. Moreover, social media is a central conduit for the forces of consumerism, applying duplicitous advertising tactics which render the end-user a vassal to the market economy. Although this is not new, the intensity has increased. In his book *Ideology*, David Hawkes claims that, “the market economy produces a systematically false consciousness” because the dogma of economic growth as indispensable to a successfully functional economy propels it towards dominance over civilized society, “an end in itself, and in consequence, it takes on the aspect of a tyrannous destructive force, whose impact is felt within each of our minds as well as in our material lives.”² The market becomes an ideology. So in order for the market to survive, people need to spend money. Therefore, advertising persuades the public that they want things by convincing them they

¹ Ngu

² Hawkes 2

need them. To achieve this, advertising intoxicates consumers with glittering images representing life better than their own: more rich, more beautiful, more healthy, more cool and so on. The problem is, if one happens to acquire this panoply of delights, indeed, if one becomes these seductive images, there would be no need to spend and the market would collapse. Therefore, to ensure its own survival, the market economy must constantly shift the goalposts to establish and maintain people's belief in their own inadequacy. One must never fully achieve. If we are always made to feel inadequate, our well-being and worldview will be negatively influenced; negative social comparison.³

³ Vaisman-Tzachor

It is no surprise then that as social media intensifies this assault, levels of mental health issues have risen. Recent research published in the *Wall Street Journal* revealed that a high proportion of teenagers are suffering from low self-esteem and the effects of "negative social comparison."⁴ The authors of the study claim that these feelings were directly connected to their usage of Instagram. Added to this, recent research by UNICEF identifies lack of social interaction caused by COVID-19 as responsible for increased internet usage, spurring feelings of depression leading to suicidal thoughts.⁵

⁴ Horwitz et al.

⁵ Idele

The peer-to-peer comparison that arises as a consequence of the constant need to represent oneself on social media is something crucial to bear in mind here, both for its positive and its negative effects. We can observe that many users have become designers or narrators of their own online lives, beginning short accounts with the word 'so' as if they were the continuation of a grander discourse; 'So, I was minding my own business, when... So, I'm looking after the neighbour's cat, when...' etc. In this instance, the observer leaps onto the platform and positions themselves as observed. In other words, the example for others to follow or be compared to.

This inclination is also manifested in the strange phenomenon of photographing a plate of food and posting it online for everyone to admire before one eats it. At face-value it may seem absurd but in the context of the rules of the market economy laid out above by Hawkes, this trend makes complete sense.⁶ Bombarded by advertisements for things one should possess, such as a delicious meal, why wouldn't people want to post their acquisitions as trophy events and assert their social accomplishment both to others and to themselves. One has designed one's own reality. Social media has indeed brought many benefits to the global community, such as raising awareness of social issues or connecting people across physical barriers. Nevertheless, people's understanding of themselves and their perceptions of the world have also been hijacked and warped by social media organs, whose *raison d'être* is to squeeze money out of our pockets.

⁶ Hawkes

2 Access to Information and the Role of the Teacher

The rise of the internet has changed our relationship towards information, the way in which we acquire it and consequently the value we place upon it. I remember in 1988 gathering a repertoire of songs to learn so I could play in bars in the evenings to support myself financially as a 'jobbing' actor. I had to travel fifty kilometres to the nearest large library and sift through index drawers to find anthologies of Cole

Porter. It took me about five or six hours but I was so happy to return with the lyrics and chords, handwritten, of about five or six songs. The effort put into gathering that information made it valuable. I still have my handwritten sheets. But now, one can acquire all of that and much more in seconds without leaving the armchair. Technology has empowered us with instant access to information so research has never been easier. This is wonderfully useful and it changes our relationships to knowledge. Nowadays, students can find information in an instant. But since it's in everybody's pockets, does this mean it doesn't need to be remembered. The skill of finding information has become more useful than the skill of remembering it. What position, then, does the teacher occupy in this relationship? If the teacher is no longer the primary provider of information, do students need conventional teachers at all? Is it time for teachers to learn a new way of teaching?

I have discussed these developments with many lecturers, some of whom are relatively young, sometimes ex-students of mine. They express similar feelings of uncertainty, that the nature of relationships between students and lecturers have changed markedly over the last ten years or so. Many lecturers express concerns about maintaining relevance in their teaching. If lecturers are not a figure of authority, do their students perceive that they are necessary? If not, how should a teacher rethink their role and strategies?

In addition to that, a large amount of educational content is moving online, in some cases with a complete absence of a teacher, further introducing new authorities. And this is not limited to theoretical content. Good vocational skills training can be found in abundance, from bespoke singing, speech and voice, to acting, movement and dance training. There are various factors driving this trend, including commercial and economic but also practical ones.

I manage a practical vocational programme, which prepares students for professional stage performance. For over ten years, there has been a vigorous discussion about moving parts of the curriculum online and creating self-study modules in contextual studies that integrate with practical skills subjects taught in the studio. Once done, the modules could be run effectively over and over (albeit with updates and modifications) while reducing costs of the lecturers, rooms, electricity bills, etc. If, in addition, the learning experience is abundantly fruitful, then surely the modules would flourish. However, the initial task of creating the modules is highly time-consuming and labour intensive, which is no doubt why it had remained an idea for so long. That is, until recent events.

By April 2020, COVID-19 had spread rapidly and forced everybody into quickly reorganising materials for online, remote learning. Suddenly online learning was no longer merely an ideological discussion—it was a practical imperative and very quickly knowledge, materials and the application of them towards practical skills development were uploaded onto a digital platform. A lot of time and energy was spent last year discovering how to make it work and expertise was acquired very quickly. Although the means of learning, and hence the students' experience, radically changed, delivery continued without any major disruption. Students' acquisition of skills and knowledge were assessed and they progressed. But importantly, this chance circumstance enabled



Listen to me.

Photo: Chitra D/O Jeevan

an investigation of the impact of the removal of face-to-face learning and the role of the teacher.

3 Challenges and Responses

Research conducted by Singapore's National Youth Council indicates that emotional disorders within Generation Z are on the rise.⁷ These issues commonly include low self-esteem, negative self-image, depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts.⁸ These anxieties affect the learning environment within the classroom. They become less stable and enthusiastic, which can disrupt the focus and, henceforth, the learning. A lot of time is spent managing student dynamics and orientating a group towards its goals. Many students have difficulty attending regularly and this can disrupt overall development of the group. In addition, students are less reliant on teachers for providing information and, in many

⁷ National Youth Council, Singapore

⁸ Idele

cases, skills. So many lecturers are seeking relevance and perhaps trying to redefine their roles. Reassuringly, however, when students were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the previous year they all overwhelmingly stated their desire to return to face-to-face learning and contact. They want physical classrooms with teachers in them. So the question is, what had they been deprived of over the previous year?

Digital media objectifies the world and with that comes the objectification of relationships and henceforth personal accountability. I suggest that digital technologies, while they have put a world of information in our pockets, have also displaced familiar and instinctive human interactions that we need to keep us healthy. There has been a large amount of research into the negative effects of social isolation, whether it has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic or not.⁹

⁹ Pietrabissa and Simpson 1

And so, now we start looking towards the big words—the noble words like community, friendship, empathy, humanity, compassion, purpose—and we can start to identify these elements as the necessary invisible fabric that binds us together in the same way that our ancient ancestors were bound together in tribes, mutually supporting each other in order to survive. So, for the teachers navigating this new territory these are important considerations in the effort to maintain relevance.

Six years ago, when I joined my current institution, we had a huge problem with attendance, motivation and a general sense of community. Although many applicants for a performing arts course are attracted by the possibility of fame (they want to be that advertisement), considerable time is spent in the first year exploring their sense of self, the world at large, our relationships with it and, very importantly, what they want to do with their time here. One mechanism for generating a healthy learning environment is the notion of *community of practice*. Each year, the students review, modify and agree upon ten guiding principles, listed below, which establish behaviours and understandings that foster goodwill and positive working relationships.

Community of Practice

1. Acceptance regardless of race, culture, religion, gender, sexuality
2. Full commitment, reliability, punctuality
3. To take risks without fear of judgment
4. To look out for each other
5. Recognise when to separate personal issues from professional issues
6. To look out for and motivate each other
7. To build trust through honesty
8. To share your story
9. Commit to the group—offer and accept mature feedback
10. Roll around on the floor and laugh.

It's within this framework of behaviour and values that students position their learning and their reasons for it. Through it they can find a clear sense of purpose and these are the essential elements that will motivate and balance them.

A recent graduate said to me that those activities and philosophical discussions in the first year were an important turning point, enabling him to focus his studies and indeed his life towards a meaningful goal. So even formidable practical classes, such as Ballet at 9 am on Monday

morning, can be located within that strong sense of purpose. He can apply the posture enabled by developing core muscular strength to his ability to communicate his worldview through performance. It is his desire to make the world a better place through his artistic labours that motives him in all his classes.

We still have many ongoing challenges. But I do suggest that designers of programmes across the educational spectrum, build these fundamental human necessities into the pedagogical flow of their course structures as a guiding compass, to help students find healthy personal insights, self-worth and a strong sense of purpose within their learning.

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