

# Teaching Generation Z: Challenges in the Contemporary Classroom

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## ABSTRACT

Today the teachers of Generation X (born between 1965-1979) and Generation Y (born between 1980-1994) face the challenging task of teaching the students of Generation Z (born between 1995-2015) in colleges. Generation Z or post-millennials have never known a world without smart phones and spend more time on digital devices than on interacting with humans, and most educators view the phone as a threat to their authority in classroom. The traditional lecture system comes into conflict with the tech-savvy, “always connected” students. In this paper, I will argue that it is neither possible nor desirable to banish technology. Instead, there is a need to shift towards a student-centred active learning model, and to attempt to have a modified flipped-classroom where smart phones with internet connectivity play a crucial role. Teachers need to embrace technology and harness the phone for pedagogical purposes by sharing online resources to generate debates in class.

Keywords: Generation Z, smart phone, active learning, flipped classroom, digital resources

## INTRODUCTION

We, the teachers in the universities (and schools), are faced with the challenging task of teaching Generation Z, and this necessitates a reflection on our teaching practices to keep the students engaged in classrooms. Demographers typically define Generation X as those born between 1965-1979, Generation Y as those born between 1980-1994, and Generation Z as those born between 1995-2015. Gen Z are characteristically known for their short attention span, have never known a world without a smart phone, and spend more time with digital devices

than with humans. At the university, they are most likely to be taught by an older generation of educators, possibly from Gen Y or Gen X, who have a very different mindset, and I along with my colleagues, find myself groping for new vocabulary to reach out to Gen Z. In this paper, I will deal with the difficulties of teaching Generation Z in traditional classrooms, and attempt to search for new pedagogical practices in dealing with literature undergraduates in the University of Delhi.

### **GENERATION Z AND THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM**

Generation Z is also described as the Internet Generation or iGen, Nexters, or the Digital Generation (Raines, 2002). In his research into “everyday learning” Brown (2000) found that iGen are quite comfortable with “multiprocessing”, and often do several things simultaneously—listening to music, talking on the mobile phone and using the computer. Further, Gen Z exhibit distinct learning preferences that involve teamwork, experiential activities, and the use of technology (Oblinger, 2003; Brown, 2000), and their expectations pose problems for educational institutions that have an ageing infrastructure and lecture mode of teaching.

Banning (2005) lists the major teaching approaches as didactic, Socratic or facilitative. The didactic teaching method is the traditional method that is teacher-centred; it mainly involves lecturing and the responsibility for learning depends largely on the knowledge expertise of the academic. The Socratic method is student orientated and students are encouraged to think independently; it lays emphasis on discussion with peers and research in order to develop critical thinking. Facilitative learning moves towards self-directed learning, where students are encouraged to become independent learners by the facilitator-academic. In a technology-driven world, where students carry personal communication devices and are constantly acquiring new skills of information-sharing, the existence of traditional methods of teaching are under threat and most teachers perceive that the mobile undermines their authority. There is need to bring about a change in this perception, Seifert (2015) suggests harnessing the mobile phones for better access to knowledge and making learning relevant to the current contemporary information-savvy society.

Let me admit that for more than a decade, I began my introductory class in college with the announcement that since I put my phone on silent mode in the class, I expected the same from my students, but today I am forced to rethink about the usage of phones in the classroom. In referring to use of technology in class, my focus is on smart phones since we are still far from a situation where students possess a personal PC or a laptop at home and college, given the varied

social backgrounds of students and college facilities across colleges. However, almost 100 per cent of the students in the DU colleges possess a smart phone, and the slogan “Your life is in your pocket” sums up their day where they are logged onto social networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Snapchat throughout the day. So, is it really possible that smart phones disappear magically in the classroom? Are the teachers competing with the lure of social media in the classroom?

Rather than viewing the phone as a threat, perhaps it is time to give the devil its due; it is neither possible nor desirable to banish technology from the classroom in the 21st century, we need to instead use it for flexible learning, that is, learning without the boundaries of time and place, characteristics that are increasingly in demand. Seifert (2015) suggests that incorporating mobile technology with teaching can provide a chance for educators to lead innovative pedagogy as it empowers learning anywhere and at any time. Jacobs argues that “always on, always connected mobile devices in the hands of students has the potential to dramatically improve educational outcomes (2013, p. 2.) Since most students have smart phones with 4G network (irrespective of wifi availability in college and at home), it allows communication between the students and the teachers through digital resources inside and outside of college. The “always on, anytime, anywhere” model of mobile learning enables the stretching of physical confines of the classroom and the fixed timings of the college day, thereby transforming the learning environment.

One may argue that 24x7 access is detrimental in the long run and blurs the personal and professional spaces, but let us look at its advantages. It allows the teacher to address Gen Z through multiple platforms, to send out initial readings before starting a text, to share audio-visual material related to the course, and to bounce off ideas in the digital space even after class. For example, sharing the YouTube link of *Malgudi Days* while teaching R. K. Narayan’s *Swami and Friends* to B. A. English (Honours) I year students, visually brings alive the 1930s imaginary city of Malgudi with its customs, ethos, and the emotional roller-coaster ride of the child protagonist. Let us remind ourselves that incorporating the mobile in the classroom is only an extension of the use of technology in college. Various administrative functions of college are already mediated through technology, such as applying for courses, paying admission fees, filling examination forms, checking results, and looking up time table and notices on the college website. The extension of the use of the mobile phone for academic purposes is one small step for [a] teacher, one giant leap for [traditional] pedagogy!

Dede, noting the importance of mobile online learning, states:

Teaching is like an orchestra. There are many different instruments, and to reach everyone you need to put a symphony of different kinds of pedagogy together. Learning technologies provide a set of instruments teachers can use to achieve that range of instructional strategies. (cited in West, 2013).

Rather than resisting and rejecting technology, one needs to embrace it when dealing with “digital natives” of Gen Z, whose way of processing information and learning is driven by unprecedented access to technology. Luckily, cheap access to 4G technology in India and near 100 per cent possession of smart phones in DU provides equality in the virtual space, and gives access to resources across distance and time constraints. Further, not only does it allow the teacher to share digital content easily, but it also democratizes learning, within the same class as well as across universities. As geography teacher Saunders puts it, “No matter where a student is—Belmullet or Dublin 4—they have access to the same high-quality learning resources” (as cited in O’Callaghan, 2017).

While emails are an obvious and formal method of interaction, I find that WhatsApp, given its semi-formal/informal platform, works best with students. WhatsApp groups have brought a sea change in the way people communicate in the last five years. For instance in their personal spheres, most people have family groups, friends’ group, school alumni group, college group, etc. The platform is the most commonly used form of messaging alerts and notices in the college as well—there are groups for staff members, various committees and of every class along with the faculty members who teach them. While ordinarily, the WhatsApp class group is used to share information such as the time table, college activities, department events, etc..

I would like to suggest that we extend the use of WhatsApp to beyond disseminating information. The teachers can use it to share audio-visual links (T. S. Eliot’s reading of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”), critical essays (it is possible to share both DOC files and pdfs) and Google Docs to collect data/feedback. In this way, the phone can be used as a dynamic tool to facilitate learning and to engage students beyond the written word, as it allows for the best of classroom and distance learning models to come together. It also allows students to access content from home, communicate with teachers, and work in collaboration with other students for projects.

### **TECHNOLOGY AND THE FLIPPED CLASSROOM**

The generation that is born in an era where technology is ubiquitous, prefers interactive and experiential learning, and Hawtrey suggests that the landscape of

higher education needs to change to address their needs. Skiba and Barton (2006) state that Gen Z “are challenging the traditional classroom teaching structure, and faculty are realizing that traditional classroom teaching is no longer effective with these students” (p. 3). Flipping the classroom has become an increasingly popular approach to meet their learning needs, and to this end I would like to propose a modified model to suit our university scenario.

The concept of the flipped classroom was introduced in 2007 by two high-school chemistry teachers, Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams, at a Colorado high school. They began recording their lessons and posting them online, so that their students could access them. Although it was aimed at helping students who missed classes, it turned into an innovative approach to teaching and learning, that has caught on globally. In a flipped-classroom model, students watch online audio or video lectures prior to coming for class, and class time is reserved for discussions, active learning, and collaborative assignments. This shifts the teacher’s role from deliverer of content to learning coach. Flipped classroom encourages active learning and requires students to think about what they are doing, rather than learning by rote. By contrast, passive learning is considered as surface learning, whereby students receive information by listening to an instructor (Lucas, as cited in Philips & Trainor). The flipped model is gaining popularity, and the New York Institute of Technology has even introduced an advanced certificate that features flipped-classroom concepts for teachers who want to integrate technology into their classrooms (Philips & Trainor, 2014).

Given the reduced teaching time under the semester system, some faculty members have shifted from blackboard to digital presentations, where the classroom “lecture” does not duplicate the content but acts as a starting point for discussion. This works especially well for subjects such as geography, accounts, and botany that involve diagrams, maps and models. Geography teacher Saunders elaborates, “Ten years ago, if I was teaching glaciation, I’d show them a diagram. Now, in a 60-second video, I can bring the children to Iceland and to a geologist standing under a glacier” (O’Callaghan, 2017).

Here, digital content is not seen as a substitute for the lecture, but as a supplement and an extension to create time for debate and discussion in the truncated time frame. The flipped classroom is essentially part of a broader conceptual framework of teaching, which promotes the use of active learning in the classroom and holds the students responsible for information gathering outside the classroom. In this respect, professors and other educators have been “flipping the classroom” long before this term gained popularity. The advent of video software and increased internet bandwidth, also allow the educators to create high-quality online content,

so that classroom time can be devoted to engaged student learning. While a literature classroom does not have much scope for charts and tables, it can be used to include videos of historical and cultural contexts of the literary texts. Given the digital handicap of DU colleges, where projectors and wireless connectivity is not available in all classrooms, we become dependent on the personal device—the smart phone with its 4G connection—in everyone’s hands.

Whether it is e-learning or flipped classroom, teachers need to think about using the mobile for the purposes of learning and research. Today, our inter-textual references in class are more often than not from visual/popular culture and indicate two things: firstly, English Studies has taken a turn towards Cultural Studies; and secondly, digital content needs to be supplemented with the lecture mode to keep the interest of Gen Z alive. With every syllabi revision, the number of canonical British texts keeps decreasing. What we teach to undergraduates as English (Hons.) in DU effectively takes the form of “World Literatures”, that includes texts from Greek epics to Indian classical texts to Indian Writing in English to Canadian poetry to Latin American novels to African plays, including a significant number of translated texts. The students are increasingly exposed via the syllabus and social media, to ever-expanding definitions of literature, its genres and sub-genres such as blog writing, graffiti art, films, graphic novels, slam poetry and micro tales. In my interview with Devadawson, she stated,

Genre fluidity is an integral part of human activity, we may engage with it in the classroom or not, but it will exist, and it will be foolish of us not to engage with it as it will make changes in the world on its own terms. So the better idea is for us to engage with it in the classroom. (Devadawson, 2017)

To make the class relevant and interesting, and to generate discussion, I find myself increasingly giving cross-references from popular forms, be it chick-lit novels, movie songs or films to explain historical-social contexts. Even then, I often find myself hitting a roadblock, as the knowledge of history, be it in the context of literature or cinema is lacking among the younger generation. For instance, it is impossible to explain the idea of “angry young man” and the angst of the 1970s without referring to Amitabh Bachchan movies of that era. How does one speak to a generation that lives only in the present, as demonstrated by their current social media behaviour? Facebook is already for the older generation (Gen X and Gen Y), who post “albums” reminiscing about print photo albums that are lying in some corner of their cupboard. Gen Z is busy on Snapchat and Tik Tok, posting photos/videos about their everyday college life as an Instagram “story”. The popularity of “story” (that disappears after 24 hours) over “feed” is

a testimony to the appeal of the ephemeral, the transient bubble that makes no pretence of making permanent footprints, albeit even digital ones.

When Gen X or Gen Y teachers face the Gen Z students, they struggle to search for new examples to explain concepts, and often the students come up with references from a web series. Last month, I was mentally searching for literary/cinematic examples to discuss transgender in class, and a student immediately came up with a reference of Kukoo in the Netflix series, *The Sacred Games* (2018). While discussing changing gender roles, one of the students suggested that I watch the net series *Permanent Roommates* (2014). We have moved far away from the debate on high and low culture among literature *wallahs*; somewhere between deriding, scorning and smirking about lowbrow forms of literature and culture, we are now using them as examples in class and doing research on them! For a teacher, the crisis is real; it is a case of Darwinian survival while teaching the post-millennial students. To address the Gen Z, not only do the teachers need to integrate technology in the classroom, but they also need to incorporate examples from popular culture/internet sources to generate discussion. In fact, this makes the classroom scenario a two-way process since the teacher can introduce the theoretical framework, and the tech-savvy, glued to internet generation can add relevant inputs about the latest genres and net series. The classroom becomes a vibrant space for active learning as opposed to the passive mode of learning based on the lecture model.

The issue of gender and stereotyping is a good starting point to post online links, and relate the course texts with contemporary debates. For example, the Gillette short film (2019) “We believe: The best men can be” against toxic masculinity can be useful to generate a debate around machoism with reference to Okonkwo’s character in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, and not just when dealing with the *Women’s Writing* paper prescribed in the Delhi University syllabus. The Amazon Prime series, *Made in Heaven* (2019), not only exposes the hypocrisy of the patriarchal society when dealing with marriages, but also depicts the harassment faced by gays in Delhi; and brings forth the views of Gen Z succinctly.

While I have screened movies based on course texts for years, I find the class WhatsApp groups allows a greater and more sustained engagement with the students over the entire semester, rather than an occasional movie screening. It also provides a good platform to share links about advertisements, web series and other visual material that thematically connects with the texts in the course. Further, the students respond positively to it and often it generates an online discussion where they take the initiative rather than being passive recipients of knowledge.

I have shared only some of my experiences in this paper, but the mobile technology has limitless possibilities of improvising pedagogy. I am not suggesting that Mary Wollstonecraft or Simone de Beauvoir be dismissed from the gender discourse, but that new sources be used as supplementary material. Let me add that it may be useful to train the teachers in using technology effectively in classroom to bring about the much needed pedagogical changes.

### **TEACHER TRAINING AND TECHNOLOGY**

One of the biggest problems of the university system is that teachers entering the profession are not given any relevant training in teaching. The B.Ed. programmes focus on teaching methodologies that are adequate for school level teaching. However in India, there is no programme that is targeted towards equipping teachers for undergraduate/postgraduate teaching. Is it assumed that young scholars who were in college till a few years back know how to manage the discipline from the other side of the table. Not only are college teachers never trained to teach, but even in-service programmes such as Orientation and Refresher Courses rarely focus on pedagogy; and teachers are now faced with the additional challenge of using technology.

Knowledge of effective teaching practices is better now than it was a century ago, thanks to advancements in disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and neuroscience. Most contemporary research in learning processes emphasizes that the social nature of learning, often called group or cooperative learning in the classroom, has a positive effect (Dean, Hubbell, Pitler & Stone, 2012). Moreover, technology can also be used to aid in social learning, be it collaborative or cooperative learning; and for this the academics need to be trained in the use and creation of e-learning materials and to develop ICT skills to innovate teaching for Gen Z. To address the technophiles, the iGeneration, it is good practice to incorporate an Active Learning (Jewitt, 2006) approach. Active Learning involves students in “doing” things by engaging them directly in learning rather than passively receiving information. The online modules do not have to replace face-to-face learning; they can work parallelly as initial steps towards incorporating technology in classroom.

Let us remind ourselves that the majority of the teaching staff was not born in the digital-informational revolution, and so must themselves undergo training to prepare for digital proficiency (Seifert, 2015). These “digital immigrants” face a challenge when addressing “digital natives”, and the education system must therefore modify its teaching methods for the oncoming wave of digitally-proficient students, their skills, experiences and needs. The shift in focus is necessary, from



a teacher-centric traditional method of lecture to a student-centred technology-led learning. Here, the teacher takes a secondary position as a facilitator in a learning process where creativity and critical thinking are encouraged. It also means a change in the attitude of the teacher, from a superior, knowledgeable dispenser of knowledge to a guide whose tech-savviness is less than that of the students. The teacher has to wade through difficult waters in confronting a generation that does not know how to write in cursive hand but can type blindly; that may be clueless in searching through a physical library but is excellent when it comes to online research; that may not be aware of gender theories but is more open to the idea of gender fluidity. However, the teacher's role, albeit as a facilitator is necessary even in such a scenario. The teacher needs to wean the students away from Wikipedia (and citing that in References!) to Google Scholar and JSTOR. He/she can guide the students towards using the mobile for research, while the students can bring in latest examples from popular culture.

### CONCLUSION

In India, the discussion about ICT and smart classrooms is still largely focussed on schools, and barely any attention is paid to the college/university classroom. Even as global, corporate universities are coming up in Delhi NCR, the majority of students are enrolled in public universities that lack the infrastructure of a smart classroom. However, let us not forget that the students have smart phones in their bags, which school students are prohibited to carry and use in class. Can we use the smart phone with internet connectivity in the hands of adults to our advantage in the classroom? I am in no way suggesting that we start conducting classes over the phone, or merely use it to watch online resources in class, but that we be open to the idea of integrating technology with the traditional model of teaching for constructive purposes. Nowadays, most college classes have a WhatsApp group; we can begin by using these groups for interaction, discussion and to send across material (text, audio, visual) as "readings". As teachers, we need to stop seeing the phone as a distraction, a disciplinary problem, and instead accept the waves of technological changes and embrace them for our purposes. This paper is in no way trying to give conclusive solutions but is borne out of challenges faced in the classroom while teaching the Generation Z and the possibilities of integrating technology in the classroom is as varied and dynamic as technology itself.

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