


# Chapter 8

## Using Generation Z's Learning Approaches to Create Meaningful Online Learning

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter presents findings from an eDelphi research study through which participant experts of Generation Z established learning approaches for online environments. Experts were members of this generation all being born in 2001 or 2002 who have participated in informal or formal pre-pandemic online learning. Background on Generation Z, description of the eDelphi research method, and implications of the learning approaches provide insight to different pedagogical practices that support successful online teaching and learning aligned with the learning approaches established by Generation Z. This generation bridges the bulk of K12 and undergraduate learners. As educators re-vision classrooms necessitated by the current educational climate, understanding the learning approaches of students provides a critical foundation on which educators can make pedagogical decisions that engage learners in online contexts.*

### INTRODUCTION

The transformation of K-12 education seemed to happen overnight as the COVID-19 Pandemic swept through the United States in March 2020. Most K-12 educators spent hours reconfiguring lessons to be delivered via virtual conference, struggled with new learning management systems, and questioned

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how long it would be before they could return to the classroom. At the same time, administrators navigated policy changes, communicated with parents and students, and organized resources like textbooks, educational materials, and Chromebooks for parent pick-up. All the haphazard attempts to keep schools running in the spring made way for summer and an opportunity to revise remote teaching and learning. In preparing new learning experiences, educators often focused on student-centered approaches to best meet the needs of their individual students. Knowing the students as learners improved teaching. Learning and knowing them went beyond the superficial social and administrative data that teachers accessed. How students engaged in learning, including where they sought knowledge and support, how they navigated information and technology tools, and what they privileged in the process, provided insight to students' learning approaches. With this knowledge in hand, educators could identify and employ access points to the curriculum that promoted engagement and student success with virtual learning content. In such a unique situation as the one educators faced in 2020, did educators know enough about their students as learners to successfully re-envision teaching and learning in online contexts?

Individuals born between 1997-2012 make up Generation Z (Dimock, 2019), and they were the bulk of students in K-12 and undergraduate higher education in 2020. Their life experiences went beyond growing up in a digital world. According to The Pew Research Center, Generation Z is identified by several unique characteristics compared to previous generations: more racially and ethnically diverse, on a focused educational trajectory, sharp differences in perspective about social and economic issues from their elders, and value for family and social change (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Generation Z (Gen Z) also identified YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat as the top three social media and digital communication tools. Educators have not experienced a generation like Gen Z and knowing them as learners could support the design of curriculum and development of pedagogical practices to best engage in online learning.

## **Knowing Generation Z as Online Learners**

The goal of this research was to understand how Gen Z students learned online in both formal and informal settings. This goal was important because Gen Z individuals made up the majority of students, and it was anticipated, pre-Covid, when this research started, that online learning was a growing part of students' formal educational experiences. Serendipitously, online learning became paramount and intensified the need to understand Gen Z as learners.

This chapter presents findings from an eDelphi research study through which participant experts established learning approaches in online environments. Experts in this study were part of Gen Z and had the additional qualifying characteristic of having participated in pre-pandemic formal or self-directed online learning. Participants were all over the age of 18 in order to participate in the research study, however, they shared characteristics identified as unique to Gen Z collectively. While participants represent a subset of the generation, the findings of this study are relatable to the entire generation who share similar characteristics.

More importantly, this chapter explores different pedagogical practices aligned with Gen Z's established learning approaches promoting successful teaching online. Prior to the spring of 2020, online teaching and learning existed in a variety of contexts, including online schools and courses, and blended learning. The educational climate beginning in March 2020 necessitated online teaching and learning in an even wider variety of configurations. Thus, this chapter seeks to deepen educators' understanding about how students engage in online learning and provide ideas for pedagogical decision making.

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