

From Antagonist to Protagonist: Shifting the Stories to Support Gen Z Students

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Abstract: This article explores prevalent stories about “Gen Z” students that unintentionally undercut both their success and learner-centered pedagogies. The authors consider how those beliefs might be reframed to serve all learners more effectively. We also explore how the racial reckoning, health pandemics, social unrest, and additional compounded traumatic events of 2020 complicated stereotypes about college-aged youth and magnified the ever-present need for more inclusive, flexible, and compassionate teaching approaches. We now have an opportunity to build on the lessons of 2020 and expand the lenses through which we consider our students’ visible behaviors and invisible experiences. We offer a rationale for and concrete pathways toward crafting more empathetic and productive stories about Gen Z students, which in turn allow us to develop teaching and assessment strategies that better align with our student-centered missions.

Keywords: Gen Z, narratives, equity, compassion, pedagogy, assessment

Imagine you are at a party and the host comes up to you and says, “I’d like to introduce you to someone. Just be prepared: They’re narcissistic, entitled, and may spend the conversation distracted, glancing at their phone. Oh, and don’t say anything about it because they’re really fragile and might collapse if they feel criticized.” How excited would you be to meet that individual? Now imagine that instead of a party, you are entering your classroom, and instead of an individual, you are facing a roomful of Gen Z students (those born after 1996). How enthusiastic do you feel about your new semester? Put another way, how have the critiques of Gen Z, as privileged (Twenge, 2018), unempathetic, electronic device-tethered (Turkle, 2017), snowflakes (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018) primed us to dislike and distrust our students? As educators and faculty developers, in this article we hope to offer a more complex and compassionate view of Gen Z students and suggest some pedagogical strategies that can promote mutual flourishing. We acknowledge that many of our colleagues do not hold negative biases against Gen Z, but the stereotypes are pervasive and show up on our campuses. Most of us will have overheard colleagues ranting against “students these days.” This article offers strategies to reframe and respond to those perceptions.

Disrupting the Stereotypes

The points disgruntled instructors make about some of the problematic Gen Z attitudes and behaviors are not necessarily false, but they fail to capture the full picture. As Chimamanda Adichie (2009) points out in her much-viewed TED Talk *The Danger of a Single Story*, we all are composed of multiple stories:

All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single

story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

So, too, when we tell only a single (negative) story about Gen Z, we have an incomplete picture of our students, which means we struggle to develop the empathy (Bayers & Camfield, 2018) and authentic relationships that lead to deep learning (Schwartz, 2019; Felton & Lambert, 2020). Gen Z is not monolithic, and a deeper dive into the attributes of this group reveals occasional contradictions as well as opportunities to re-design curriculum to better support today's college students. After unpacking many of the stereotypes attributed to Gen Z, we will then turn to an exploration of how to leverage their assets to support growth.

Of Privilege and Passivity

Despite accusations of helicopter parenting causing a rise in student entitlement (Allen, 2019), unnuanced Gen Z stories were called into question as COVID-19 and social unrest spread across the US in 2020. Higher education's abrupt shift to remote teaching and learning shone a light on and magnified profound educational inequities. The pandemic and racial reckoning brought systemic injustices, including police brutality against unarmed black people and unequal access to medical care, to the fore. Meanwhile, amid great uncertainty, compounded trauma, and any number of barriers, many of our students have shown up to learn. They have also helped create political change. In person and on social media, they turned out in record numbers to protest systemic racism and police violence against black Americans, and then to vote: one study estimates that 52% of protestors at Black Lives Matters demonstrations in the early months of the pandemic were between the ages of 18-29 (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020), while an estimated 52-55% of eligible voters under age thirty cast ballots in the 2020 election (Tufts CIRCLE, 2020). Our Gen Z students are not all retreating into privileged and protected pockets; not unlike young idealists from past counter-culture movements, they are an activist and connected generation.

Gen Z is also more racially and ethnically diverse than previous generations and is pursuing higher-education at greater rates (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). At many institutions generally, and Camfield's in particular, students are increasingly anything-but entitled and privileged. Often dubbed "the university of the future," -- where more than 80% of students are members of historically underrepresented groups, 60% are Pell eligible, and 75% are the first in their families to attend college -- the University of California at Merced has received national recognitions: # 1 among public universities in outperforming expected graduation rates and # 5 among all universities in social mobility (UC Merced "Accolades," 2021). This has not been achieved by insisting students assimilate and conform to our visions of the 'typical' college student. Instead, UC Merced has become a "student-ready college" by making room for those learners who have had to work two jobs and support family obligations, as well as study. These students have no family helicoptering around, monitoring their success. Often it is quite the opposite: establishing boundaries with family and needing to defend time spent studying takes up cognitive and emotional bandwidth for many students.

Further, their demographics have brought them added challenges. Hammond (2015) describes how "underserved English learners, poor students, and students of color routinely receive less instruction in higher order skills development than other students...as a result a disproportionate number of culturally and linguistically diverse students are dependent learners" (p. 12-13). This means they have come to rely on their teachers to define and pre-determine their learning, often through worksheets that call on the most basic of rote memorization or comprehension. When students arrive in college, many professors expect them to be self-regulating, independent learners. This disconnect between past schooling and college expectations creates an added academic burden for students

already managing a whole host of other issues. To overcome this and foster learning independence, instructors may try to design opportunities for students to engage with “productive struggle that actually grows our brainpower” (p. 12-13). Unfortunately, such struggle can also be overwhelming for some students, especially when accompanied by an “amygdala hijack” (p. 40) brought on by threats such as imposter syndrome or stereotype threat. Therefore, as Verschelden (2017) states, we may need to spend more time helping our students manage these cognitive loads, rather than dismissing their inattention or late assignments as the byproducts of entitlement and privilege. How should we design all courses to foster this growth and allow for these demands?

Of Snowflakes

Gannon (2020) eloquently challenges the accusation that Gen-Z-ers are ‘snowflakes’—fragile and overly-sensitive—, calling “the argument that today’s students are somehow less capable of dealing with controversial ideas or being intellectually challenged... fundamentally disingenuous” (p. 126). He further elaborates a compelling counter-narrative:

Far from being a generation of entitled snowflakes, today’s college students are under siege. They have less funding, less support, learn in more dysfunctional institutions, and live in an environment that is more fractured and polarized than ever. They work more hours at more jobs than any previous generation of students, deal with more issues related to anxiety and mental health than any of their forebears, and face a postgraduate economy so bleak that the Baby Boom generation is in full-on denial of its very existence. All this, and they are mocked, by generations that had it twice as good, about how it’s all their fault (p. 126).

Unfortunately, this economic uncertainty is compounded by capitalist pressure for a college education to reap primarily monetary rewards (Tretina, 2021), which threatens to reduce educational interactions to the transactional. How, then, might we create a college curriculum that acknowledges future uncertainty, builds tolerance for ambiguity, and emphasizes transformation over transaction?

Of Electronics Addiction

Despite compelling research on social media addiction, sometimes called *IDisorder* (Mitus, 2021), disrupting the myth of the distracted, social-media-saturated Gen Z-er necessitates unpacking a couple of biases and blindspots. The first is the fundamental attribution error instructors may engage in where an interior monologue might sound like this: “When I check my e-mail during a Zoom meeting, I am being efficient with my time and am paying enough attention to the meeting to get the gist of it. Whereas when my students chat over Discord during my class, they are disrespectful and miss out on important elements of my lesson.” Recognizing ways attention works for all humans can help rectify this fallacy. College instructors may also carry outdated knowledge about today’s internet users. For example, observations about “Facebook depression” (O’Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson & CCM, 2011) are over a decade old. To think today’s teens are as vulnerable to those effects might be inaccurate, especially when even at that time the conclusions were disputed with counterclaims that social media actually be useful in combating stigma surrounding mental illness (Moreno et al, 2011).

Secondly, we might need to look at *how* our students are engaging with the internet and social media, not just noting *that* they are doing so. For example, our students are far more likely to verify the factual basis for a claim or pursue a topic of idle curiosity using a quick internet search than previous generations were who had to rely on the library-housed, multi-volume *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

We can expect that some students may use Google superficially or trust on-line sources too implicitly. It is our job as educators to teach critical digital literacy, not to assume they come to college with it already intact.

We might also note that concerns over potential social problems caused by the pursuits of youth started long before electronic entertainment came around (Best, 1998). Moreover, Gen Z itself appears to be somewhat divided on the impact of social media on their lives. In a recent Pew survey (Parker & Igielnik, 2020), roughly one-third says the effect is mostly positive, about one-quarter say it has been mostly negative, and just under half say it has been neutral. Those who see it positively tend to say it helps them feel connected with friends and family, whereas those who say the effect is negative worry about bullying and rumor spreading. This, again, illustrates the danger of perceiving Gen Z as monolithic and incapable of awareness and self-analysis.

Moreover, the 20-year span Gen Z has been around has also witnessed a re/evolution in the use of the internet as a base for creative pursuits. Far from passive users, today's college students are making art, composing new music, performing original poetry, and hosting podcasts at never-before-seen rates. A survey (Rapp, 2019) of over 1,200 Gen Z-ers revealed more than half engaged in creative pursuits through platforms like YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok; however, this did not mean that their off-line lives lacked artistic engagement: 77% of the respondents reported that they spend their free time offline drawing, journaling, or playing an instrument. This has also translated into an interest in homemade crafts and do-it-yourself interior design tips, which are often freely shared on-line. How can we harness the potential of media engagement while also fostering digital self-regulation, civility, and information literacy?

Of Cancel Culture and Conformity

Despite legitimate concerns over cancel culture, “an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty” (Letter on Justice and Open Debate, 2020), Gen Z also exhibits a great deal of creativity and acceptance of ambiguity. Far from the merely superficial or decorative, Gen Z creativity leverages the wealth of information available on the internet to ‘crowd source’ and to perfect the ‘mash-up,’ a “melting of borders, both aesthetic and cultural” (Rapp, 2019). Additionally, they report that while such borrowing, mixing, and complication allows for greater expression, it also tends to be grounded in an individual's personal truth. Increasingly, this truth is built around:

social causes like LGBTQ issues, body positivity, and mental health... The internet can be a judgmental place, but Gen Zers are unabashedly using their reach to create communities and dialogue around their fluidity. They're redefining gender identities and breaking beauty norms, going beyond tutorials and selfies to establish more multifaceted personas (p. 67).

If our students are making videos to promote sustainability and/or body positivity, how might we leverage some of what is happening organically in our students' spare time and harness that creativity in our classrooms?

Gen Z-ers also seem more comfortable with ambiguity, prefer to blur boundaries, and embrace change (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). For example, many do not identify with a political party but rather support specific causes and engage in grassroots efforts to promote them. They are more apt to self-monitor, suspend judgement, and stand-up. According to a study published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF, 2021), Gen Z members tend to be more open-minded, liberal-leaning and actively engaged in advocating for the fair and equal treatment of others. Their strong presence

at protests and the election polls in 2020 demonstrated this propensity. True, this tendency can sometimes be taken to a “cancel culture” extreme, but it also signals an unwillingness to passively accept the status quo – what in our nation’s founders was praised as a heroic revolutionary spirit. It also points to an educational opportunity: how can we work with our students to identify effective ways of challenging authority/dominant norms/objectionable behavior and stimulating discourse?

Revealing and Re-Prioritizing Hidden Narratives

Along with the incomplete narratives discussed previously, an insistence on the most unflattering and negative interpretations of student behaviors risks ‘blaming the victim,’ masks more nuanced realities, and impedes more complex understanding of our students’ experiences. Even if we accept the “tethered (to electronic devices) and privileged” Gen Z labels, we may miss out on two others. As discussed by Camfield, Moore, & Allen (2020), Gen Z students also labor under the ‘pressure to be perfect,’ to perform for the approval of parents, coaches, teachers, and peers. This claim is borne out by studies that show a linear increase in perfectionism for Gen Z when compared to previous generations of college students (Curran & Hill, 2017). They also feel profoundly ‘unsafe:’ from school shootings, to uncertain economic forecasts, not to mention global pandemics; it is no surprise we are seeing epidemic levels of depression and anxiety (Twenge, 2018), arguably not entirely due to dependence on their digital devices.

Sadly, many of the stereotypes in circulation about Gen Z have at root the same impact on students: each undermine resilience by either removing any adversity from students’ paths or by creating unbearable burdens. Neither allows students to develop learning muscles necessary for perseverant engagement with tough issues. Camfield, Moore, and Allen (2020) asked: how might we reframe our conceptualization of ‘rigor’ to create just the right amount of difficulty so that students develop the skills to ‘bounce back’ in the face of academic challenge? It also suggested that such a reconceptualization requires “critical empathy” from instructors where we reconsider “our perception of what students ‘should’ be retaining from certain lessons, providing us with the opportunity to revisit lessons, revise our curriculum for effectiveness, and model a mode of continuous learning that brings collaborative discovery back to our classrooms” (p. 130). Now we add to that story.

As co-authors, in our teaching and in presenting on our past research, we have had the opportunity to talk with many Gen Z students. Not only have they expressed appreciation for our capacity to see the fullness and complexity of their identities, but they have also added to our insights. One point often made is that, perhaps because of the constant self-comparison encouraged through social media or because of being told they are ‘privileged and entitled,’ some students do not feel they have the right to own their own stories. As one young woman put it, “I keep seeing these stories about people starving in the Third World and about others being forced into sex trafficking. Somehow that makes my own problems with managing my schedule seem trivial.” On one hand, such a statement might be lauded as valuable perspective-taking; on the other hand, minimizing our own experiences is an unproductive form of self-gaslighting. How might we help our students contextualize their knowledge and feelings, balancing what they learn about the experiences of others with their own?

Disrupt Inherited Pedagogical Narratives

Unfortunately, instead of enhancing our students’ positive identities, many of our inherited pedagogical practices are shaped by motifs of subjugation and radical individualism. More specifically, our campuses are still fundamentally unwelcoming to women and students of color. This is not surprising as academic institutions in this country are rooted in white-centered and patriarchal structures (Hill et al. 2020). The norms of hierarchy (e.g., uncritically deferring to the sage on the stage)

and expectations about productivity and professionalism (e.g., that academic work is separable from one's personal obligations and unaffected by emotions) that we often replicate in our classrooms reinforce this oppression. Additionally, inherited instructional and assessment practices that are teacher-centric, that promote competition among students, and that use punishment as incentive recast and maintain persistent patterns of domination and marginalization. We have seen this recently as institutions have addressed concerns about student cheating in remote environments by doubling-down on surveillance technology, which tells students that they are not to be trusted, further undermines their self-efficacy and resilience, and maintains a dependency model of education. Myths about alternative approaches being less "rigorous" (perhaps code for less white and male) impede change. Finally, over-applications of the work of scholars like Carol Dweck (2007) and Angela Duckworth (2018) can do the same: while the frameworks of growth mindset and grit can potentiate self-efficacy and learning, neither mindset nor grit alone can overcome systemic oppression, or a fundamental lack of access to resources and opportunity. No amount of resilience can make up for historical educational inequities, not to mention immediate barriers to learning like no access to the internet, an empty gas tank, or too little money for textbooks.

Embrace Relational Narratives

Another motif that has emerged in our recent work is the hunger of Gen Z for meaningful relationships. Some have expressed this as feeling like they "have to 'curate' their lives on social media and 'watch their every word' for fear of 'cancel culture.'" However, others simply say they want to connect with other people in "real" and "deep" ways. Here, Twenge's (2018) work and her observation that "iGen'ers spend less time interacting with their peers face-to-face than any previous generation" (p. 71) and her conclusions about a rise in loneliness resonates. However, she attributes this almost exclusively to internet use, not perhaps to overscheduling or other conflicting demands on time. A different picture of reality, as revealed by the recent pandemic and the shift to emergency remote instruction, is that students crave face-to-face connection with each other. For example, in the UC Merced New Student Survey from fall 2020, despite the fact that 60% of the 1,019 first-year students completing the survey said they had a strong sense of belonging to the campus community, 54% identified "missing connection with family or friends," with 60% also noting "difficulty making new friends," as barriers to their schoolwork or academic success (UC Merced IRDS, 2021). Campuses can help students build more meaningful connections if they prioritize relationship-building through activities like collaborative learning and team science.

We also know relationships with instructors matter as well. Camfield's 2016 study of developmental writing and writers proposed the theory of mediated-efficacy which described the role of a teacher as that of an intermediary that helps students "reconcile negative self-beliefs developed in the past with newly-forged positive identities that could impact their future performance" (p. 9). It acknowledges instructor power and suggests we use this as a force for good, to help "students dismantle learned helplessness, dispute pessimism, and develop optimism" (p. 10). In this context:

specific course content or skills become the tools of that mediation. Useful yes, but not unlike the utility of knowing how to use a hammer, only truly valuable when used to build something. Mediated-efficacy requires a balance between helping students wield tools on their own and creating the environment in which they believe they have something worthwhile to construct (p. 10).

Felton and Lambert (2020) describe relationships as the "beating heart of the undergraduate experience" (p. 1), and while they vaunt their importance, they simultaneously caution that "they

should not occur by happenstance or only for some students” (p. 1). Their robust study, involving 400 interviews with students, faculty and staff at 29 higher-education institutions across the country, lead them to conclude “the future is relationship-rich” (p. 147). Relationships can be transformative, positively shaping student self-esteem, sense of meaning, and world view.

Changing the Narratives

Harkening back to the previously-cited TED Talk, Adichie (2009) notes that “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.” Figuring out strategies to humanize our perceptions of Gen Z students is imperative. To do so we must build our curriculum and develop our pedagogical practice around narratives that help students manage cognitive load, utilize their abundant creativity, promote tolerance for ambiguity, experience academic rigor that builds resilience, activate critical empathy, own their own stories, and build relationships.

While no one would have asked for these circumstances, the events of 2020 did create greater potential for higher education to think outside of the box, or even to re-examine why that ‘box’ exists – where did it come from? Who is being asked to perform contortions to fit into it? As educators had to abruptly shift to teaching remotely amid compounded traumatic events and further visibility of systemic injustice, we witnessed an expansion of empathy and creativity: instructors tirelessly led with care to stay connected with students and sustain learning. Many radically reimagined teaching and assessment strategies to support students as everyone in the classroom navigated distress and uncertainty. We now have an opportunity to build on the lessons of 2020 and expand the lenses through which we consider our students’ visible behaviors and invisible experiences.

Shifting Perspective or Point-of-view

We can start by shifting our perspective or points-of-view as instructors. How we imagine our students, even before meeting them, matters. If we picture Gen Z students as a monolithic group of privileged, protected, and distracted young adults, we will be more apt to misjudge and misinterpret their actions. If we replace that story with one of a remarkably diverse, creative, engaged, and connected generation, we will be more open to seeing the deeper dimensions of their work and behaviors, as well as identifying our own blindspots in perspective. Once we are in the classroom together, we can assume the best of our students and interpret their actions with empathy (Bayers & Camfield, 2018).

At workshops, we often engage faculty in an exercise designed to reveal how quickly instructors can leap to negative judgments on the basis of incomplete information. We invite participants to write down a common behavior they see manifest in their Gen Z college students, cite a stereotypical explanation of that behavior, then imagine a more generous interpretation of what might be going on for the student under the surface. To cite one example, “students don’t do the reading” often comes up as a common problem. Initial and oversimplified interpretations might point to learner laziness, disinterest, or attention deficits, among other possibilities, as the cause. However, instead of judging or blaming the student, a deeper consideration can reveal a lack of instructor transparency around why and exactly how to approach a reading assignment or can uncover a lack of alignment between readings and course goals or in-class activities. Such insights lead to productive pedagogical interventions. To the extent being unprepared for class *is* the student’s fault, replacing the dismissive assumption of laziness with a more generous interpretation -- lack of access to the reading material, or competing demands (other classes, work, and family, for example) -- activates trust and

builds relationships. If we can compassionately imagine the barriers to our Gen Z students' learning, we can design better pathways to success.

Alongside instructor empathy and compassion for Gen Z student needs must be an active commitment to fostering hope in those students who may feel overwhelmed or jaded. Equity-minded educators should not minimize those things many of our Gen Z students experience and oppose: oppression and social injustice. An ever-increasing number of our students live these realities. So, we agree with Hammond (2015) that “instead [of amplifying a sense of victimization], we should focus on highlighting a community’s resiliency and vision for social change” (p. 92).

Redesigning the Setting

Begin with cultural frameworks. Given that higher education was historically written by and to further empower white men, a substantial portion of our Gen Z students do not see themselves or feel safe and supported within traditional academic narratives, even if they are unaware of the source of this unease (and may unfairly blame themselves for their own discomfort). Creating welcoming and affirming spaces for all of our students will require educators to question not only the foundations of knowledge and standard practice in each and every one of our fields, but also our own explicit and implicit biases. We need to rewrite our teaching stories to include our current students as central figures and become vigilant in interrogating if and how our instructional assumptions, policies, practices, and content draw from, affirm, and speak to the various identities and cultural frameworks our students hold. As we elaborate below, strategies like anti-racist pedagogy, universal design for learning, and other approaches grounded in collaborative learning and transparent teaching support this rewrite.

Antiracist pedagogy requires that we work to see, make visible, and actively counter the ways in which our academic practices and curricula are built upon primarily Eurocentric voices and views; this includes interrogating disciplinary foundations that have come to be seen as inherent and devoid of a particular cultural perspective (Blakeney, 2011). In the classroom, antiracist pedagogy requires us to question not just what we teach, but also how we do so (we explore equitable, power-sharing practices below). Those among us who hold white privilege must commit to the lifelong work of antiracism on personal levels in order to engage it systematically in our pedagogy. In *Me and White Supremacy*, Layla F. Saad (2020) expresses the societal impact that this inner work can have: “since systems and institutions are created and held in place by many individual people, it is my hope that as more people do the personal inner work here, there will be a ripple effect of actionable change of how white supremacy is upheld out there” (p. 12). “Out there” includes in our classrooms, offices, and every other aspect of campus culture. As we expand our own knowledge and resiliency for engaging in uncomfortable yet necessary conversations about race and power, we can model for and better support our Gen Z students in doing the same. Such conversations necessitate careful course and classroom architecture.

Alongside establishing cultural frameworks, build enhanced access. The mindset fostered by Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can also help us better imagine, prepare for, and support our highly diverse Gen Z students. UDL acknowledges that all learners come to our classes with varying strategies for and barriers to learning—differences that may or may not be visible—and prompts us to build in flexibility as a design and operating principle. Such adaptability can help us better serve not only the estimated 20% of Gen Z students with learning disabilities (NCES, 2019), but also those from diverse linguistic, cultural, and academic backgrounds, those juggling competing demands in their lives, and others marginalized by traditional academic structures and practices. UDL guidelines, outlined by CAST (2018), encourage instructors to provide multiple means of: 1) engagement, or ways of stimulating learner interest and motivation; 2) representation, or ways of presenting information

and content; and, 3) action and expression, or ways of allowing learners to demonstrate what they know. We encourage colleagues to consider their go-to course design, instructional, and assessment approaches and, in each case, ask: “Who is best served by this approach? Who might be excluded by it? What barriers to learning might I unintentionally be creating with this approach? What additional options might I build-in to account for learner variability?” For example, if my assessment is only based on written work, students with dysgraphia or dyslexia will struggle to demonstrate what they have learned. Providing alternative ways for students to demonstrate their learning (e.g., through voice recordings), aligned with the same learning outcomes, will offer more equitable access. If my go-to instructional practice is small-group work, introverts may struggle to participate. Assigning specific roles or tasks within those groups and balancing team-based learning with independent work makes space for all students to engage. In addition to empowering all students with more pathways to, though, and beyond the achievement of course learning outcomes, the flexible mindset fostered by UDL can help us better adapt as we continue to navigate the impact of the global pandemic and further disruptions to teaching and learning.

All students thrive in a welcoming and collaborative classroom environment. Learning invitations and gestures that “summon students cordially” into our learning spaces (Purkey, 1992) should ground our courses. Yet as Bali et al. (2018) note, it is not enough to “assume that saying ‘welcome’ will mean people feel welcome;” rather, we need to craft and support “intentionally equitable hospitality.” Before our classes begin, we can set the tone for engagement through an asynchronous opportunity to interact, such as quick video introductions or short narratives that allow them to begin telling their stories and making connections. This will lay the foundation to grow and sustain community during the semester. Equity Unbound (n.d.) has curated a rich collection of structured synchronous and asynchronous activities, each with detailed instructions, for building and sustaining “intentionally equitable hospitality.” Far from being mere “ice breakers,” activities that allow us to get to know our Gen Z students and that create multiple and meaningful opportunities for them to interact with one another will allow us to not only connect our course content to their interests and aspirations, but also affirm their identities. To reframe our own stories about Gen Z students, we need to hear theirs. Something as simple as a daily check-in helps students feel seen and valued and can create ripple effects, such as more robust participation in instructors’ office hours.

Inviting students to help shape discourse agreements also sets the tone for community and collaboration while affirming existing Gen Z values of advocating for the fair and equal treatment of others (AECF, 2019). When students become active agents in shaping the learning environment, they become more invested in and accountable to the class community (Brookfield & Preskill 2005). This could have an added benefit of disrupting a view of learning as individualistic and transactional. The syllabi that house these agreements, alongside additional expectations and roadmaps to course success, can also be characterized by welcoming, collaborative, and supportive language; for example, we can replace cold, dry, and punitive syllabi statements with invitations and strategies to learn, connect, and succeed. As an illustration, statements about university honor codes are often inherited from a boilerplate document that assumes the worst and offers little educational support:

Students must observe the University Honor Code. This professor strictly enforces this code and its stipulated penalties. If you have any questions about plagiarism and other departures from the right way of conducting yourself in academic situations, speak with me. Ignorance of policy is not an excuse to violate policy. (Camfield syllabus: 2013)

How different a more intentionally designed and educationally focused statement can sound:

Plagiarism is an issue that is as complicated as linguistic expression is nuanced. For our

purposes, plagiarism entails representing another's work as your own. Note that plagiarism includes:

- submitting work that is done in part or wholly by someone else (or done by you for a different class/context)
- paraphrasing or summarizing any source without referencing it
- copying any source without using quotation marks or block indentation.

In sum, if you submit your own work with all outside sources or ideas carefully and correctly documented, you will have maintained academic honesty. Remember that writing is a thinking process, so you should engage with resources as though you were in a conversation. The integrity of your ideas rests on maintaining scholarly habits while in this dialogue with experts; ask questions and research actively with detailed notes. (Camfield syllabus: 2021)

In addition to sounding harsh, the first statement also exemplifies the hidden curriculum, which is a product of generational-privilege; it assumes student knowledge about “the right way” of conducting oneself in academic situations. Such exclusionary assumptions can add to students’ cognitive loads (Verschelden, 2017) and activate anxiety, whereas more transparent and inviting statements can ease and welcome.

Co-authoring the design of learning activities when possible—for example, by soliciting student input on content or assignments—can simultaneously support class community and learner autonomy by shifting traditional classroom roles from teacher- to learning-centered dynamics. Such activities need not be time-consuming and may result in better student understanding of expectations. For example, students can analyze an assignment prompt or exemplary model to identify salient components and steps necessary for successful completion to co-generate the rubric by which they will subsequently be evaluated. This can offer students’ a sense of both agency and connectedness. It can also counter the sense of helplessness and isolation fostered by the pandemic and recent social upheaval. A place to begin is with discussion of course outcomes: We can invite students to consider how the class aligns with their own learning, professional, and life goals. We can explore the “emergent outcomes” students discover as the course unfolds (Stommel 2017). When we provide these kinds of opportunities for students to weigh in on and take stock of how our teaching, class activities, and their approaches to learning support their values, we make space for them to better ‘own their own stories’ and see their education as a mechanism for fleshing out their autobiographies.

We can further empower Gen Z students by transparently sharing scripts for how to succeed in course activities, from class interactions to assignments and assessments. Transparent teaching has been demonstrated to boost academic confidence, motivation, learning strategies, skill transfer, and success for all students, and to be particularly supportive of students who are the first in their families to go to college and/or from groups historically excluded from college campuses (TILT Higher Ed). When we explicitly and straightforwardly clarify the purpose, task, and criteria for success in our assignment instructions, we decode the unspoken rules for how to succeed in academia. Helping our Gen Z students understand the meaning, merit, and relevance of coursework to their academic success and future careers can generate buy-in, while meaningful feedback can help them identify concrete ways to improve their performance and overall learning.

Transparent teaching provides a scaffolding that allows students to explore and own their identities as scholars, or become active authors of their learning stories. Hanstedt (2018) describes this negotiation as key to developing the skills to confront “wicked,” 21st-century problems:

Authority in this context implies authorship, the ability to write and rewrite, shape, and create. At the same time, this ability comes from something or someone. Authority is granted, given, and earned. The content and skills students acquire during their years in college are crucial; they are part of what creates a sense of authority in students (p. 5).

This process entails a shifting of traditional and transactional classroom roles and expectations. Our classes can give students spaces to practice assuming the kind of authority Hanstedt describes, sometimes getting it wrong, and trying again. To cite one example, identifying and even scripting roles in small group work can allow students to intentionally listen to and support one another, to try on different conversational gestures, to build their academic confidence, and to find their scholarly voices. Structured collaboration lays the groundwork for organic interaction, civil discourse, and creative problem solving. When students are clear on what the task is and know that everyone will not only be expected to but also have the opportunity to participate equitably, their anxiety is reduced, and they can engage more productively (Eddy & Hogan 2017; Kernahan 2019).

Transparency and structure, from scaffolding frameworks and roles for activities to clear and accessible roadmaps through our courses and assignments, can also provide a crucial sense of safety for students returning to campus following the traumatic events of 2020 and beyond. It has always been important to reduce cognitive load and keep our students' focus on learning through clear course pathways. The extraordinary events our Gen Z students have witnessed and experienced in their recent lives--a global pandemic, repeated police brutality against black Americans, extreme political divisiveness, environmental catastrophes (hurricanes, wildfires, floods, and other disasters), a record number of mass shootings, and more--heighten the need for clarity and structure in our classrooms.

As we co-create this new narrative, instructors must also become more mindful of how we speak to and with students, as language can convey either power-over or power-with others. This does not mean a sacrifice of rigor. Hammond (2014) describes how teachers as “warm demanders” (p. 97) find the right balance between a firm insistence on academic standards and a nurturance that allows students to feel safe to approach with questions. Engaging in conversations that communicate our support as well as provide an entrée into academia can also activate student creativity. If we are open to hearing students' suggestions, we can harness some of that Gen Z inventiveness. One recent example of this occurred during the shift to emergency remote instruction in spring 2020 in Camfield's first-year seminar course intended to introduce students to life at a research university. As such, it had a required component that was originally assigned as a group-written research paper with an accompanying in-class oral presentation. The pandemic made this impossible, so Camfield asked her students for ideas on alternatives. One student suggested they each compose and record a research-based podcast to be uploaded to the course discussion board. Not only did these podcasts fulfill all of the learning outcomes of the traditional assignment, but the quality of the production was also far higher than the previous in-class presentations. Moreover, students expressed far more enjoyment and satisfaction with the assignment, as well as feelings of having gained relevant or ‘real world’ skills. Such a reimagined assignment points to the value of tapping into Gen Z creativity and devising new ways of assessing their learning.

While the previous example demonstrates the way we can change how we approach assessment to better support learning, another component of the dialogue we develop with students has to do with the language of our feedback. Camfield and Bayers (2019) describe traditional assessment protocols as “mindless,” in that they can be overly fixated on perceptions of objectivity and scientific validity and rely on isolated, summative, and high-stakes tests, making students feel dehumanized and disconnected from the learning process. We have called for more “dialectical evaluative practices that invite students into, guide students through, and take students beyond learning in the classroom in ways that honor their agency as whole persons” (p. 123). This can involve

figuring out ways, like student self-annotation, to access invisible learning (Camfield, Moore, & Allen, 2020) or substituting punitive reading quizzes, which reinforce dependent learning and instructor power, with more creative approaches, like the “one-pager,” where a reading response is built around a student-selected image that they feel typifies the dominant theme or take-away from the assigned reading. Subsequent class discussion can then be structured around the sharing of these images. Not only does this assessment approach encourage completion of assigned work through peer-based accountability, but it also fosters visual literacy and other 21st-century skills (Minor, 2021).

In addition to the examples previously shared, other forms of more mindful assessment might include: outcomes framed around integrated concepts; more emphasis on frequent, lower-stakes assessments (versus less frequent, high-stakes tests); asset- (instead of deficit-) based evaluation methodologies and rubrics; an emphasis on meaningful, targeted feedback over grades; self- and peer-assessment; and opportunities for post-assessment reflection and metacognition. Each of these approaches can counter the grade-driven, competitive culture our Gen Z students were raised in and help spark significant, creative, collaborative, and effortful learning that honors error and even discomfort as part of the process. The global pandemic prompted many instructors to experiment with these and other alternatives to traditional assessment practices. Our hope is that this rewriting of old assessment narratives continues to evolve as we move forward.

Conclusion

By inviting educators to shift their perspective on how they imagine their students (even before meeting them), to redesign the settings in their classroom, to help students craft scripts for success, to build dialogues with them that flatten hierarchy and foster learning relationships, we hope to revise the narrative of how we teach Gen Z students. With this new framing, students can better manage cognitive load, ambiguity, and the anxiety brought about by living in these complex times. We have also suggested ways to leverage Gen Z's assets to help them develop the resilience to withstand whatever the future may bring. Yet in the end, much as we have attempted to disrupt some of the stereotypes and “repair broken dignity” (Adichie, 2009), we do not mean to imply we have told the whole story. Instead, we hope to encourage instructors to enter their classrooms more enthusiastic about their teaching, empathetic toward Gen Z, and inspired to ask: *who are you?* – with the reminder that a story does not tell itself and is highly influenced by how it is prompted.

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