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UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING GEN Z IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Elena Cickovska

Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality, Ohrid,
elenacickovska@yahoo.de

ABSTRACT

This article deals with understanding and reaching the new generation of students in higher education and aligning to their learning styles. Presented are the results of a survey conducted with educators at the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality in Ohrid, North Macedonia and other studies which show that behavioral characteristics of the students seem inadequate from the educator's point of view. Research outcomes about Gen Z learning styles, also discussed in the paper, show a discordance of expectations and aspirations between educators and students due to generational differences which lead to disconnection and deficient learning outcomes. To build and apply an adequate student-centered approach, educators are required to familiarize with the characteristics of the new student generation and need guidance to optimize communication and to improve their teaching process. The article also provides directions for teaching students in higher education and for students of tourism in particular.

KEY WORDS: higher education, Gen Z, teaching, tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Educators in higher education are struggling with nowadays students. They have problems to activate them in class. Can we do something to activate our students? Do nowadays students have any interests? Do they even want to learn something? These and similar questions often arise in everyday conversations between colleges in higher education and on our Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality in Ohrid, Republic of North Macedonia. In the conversations I often heard complaints about our students in general, that it is difficult or impossible to activate them, that learning outcomes are reduced, that they don't want to learn and thus the enthusiasm of the educators is decreasing. As a professor with research interest in the field of teaching methodology it inspired me to get to the bottom of the matter and investigate the situation more closely. Our perception and opinion about the students influences the teaching process and consequently the learning results. In order to first determine what the professor's opinions really were, a survey was carried out at the Faculty. The research and the results are presented in the first chapter.

If our ways how we try to motivate, stimulate and teach the students, which is linked to our perceptions of them, mismatch to the aspirations and expectations of nowadays students it could be the cause of the problems. According to generational research students in all semesters in higher education in 2020 belong to the so called Generation Z – Gen Z. The studies on GenZ largely coincide internationally in terms of pattern recognition. In this article are presented patterns that are relevant for educators. We educators belong to previous generations and need to familiarize with the characteristics of the new student generation to find appropriate ways to improve our teaching process and the learning outcomes. After knowing the characteristics of the students as generation educators also need guidance to use adequate methods and to optimize the communication. This article provides directions for teaching students in higher education and for students of tourism in particular.

EDUCATORS PERCEPTION OF GEN Z STUDENTS

The initial assumption about the situation at the Faculty was that the educators believe that the students are passive and not interested in studying. Gen Zs on

the other hand expect of educators to understand them, to adapt and align with their values and learning styles [1]. Are their expectations congruent with those of the educators? Are there additional problems which influence the situation?

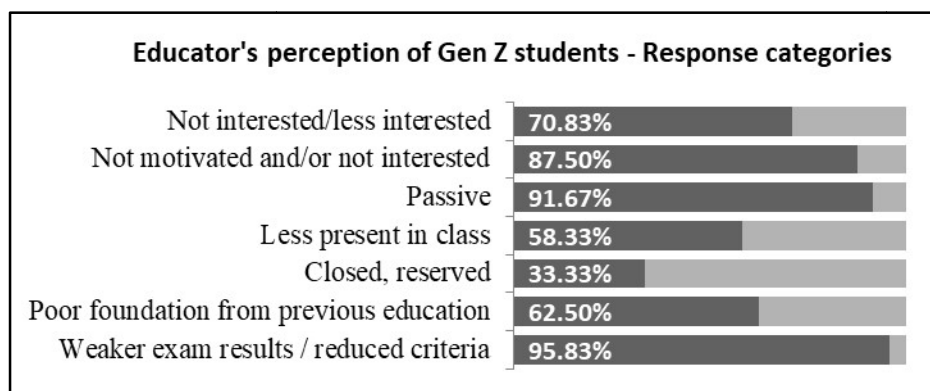
Research methods and results

The research about educators perception of Gen Z students in higher education was conducted 2020 with 35 educators at the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality in Ohrid, North Macedonia, with a questionnaire. It began with interviews with the questionnaire but due to the situation with COVID-19 the rest had to be sent by e-mail. The results are from 68,57% or 24 of the educators, because not everybody answered per e-mail. All of the educators who answered the questionnaire are from previous generations: 25% belong to the generation born in 1946-1964 (Baby Boomers), 62.5% to those born in 1965-1980 (Generation X) and 12.5% born in 1981- 1995 (Millennials). 58.33% teach at the faculty for more than 20 years, 37.5% between 7-20 years and 4.17% less than 7 years.

The questionnaire had open-ended questions with the purpose not to limit or influence the surveyed with predefined answers and to provide qualitative answers based on their opinion and experience. The questions were about what higher education educators think about the new generations of students who started studying directly after secondary education from the academic year 2016/2017 and later in terms of experiences with them in and out of class and about the learning outcomes compared to previous generations of students. Collected were also data about their birth year according to generations and the years they teach at the Faculty.

The results will be presented in response categories derived from answer formulations that have the same or similar meaning i.e. describe the same matter with different discourse and are relevant to the teaching and the impact on the learning outcomes. The results will not be divided according to the professor's generation or by years of working at the faculty, because there is no difference in the appearance of the answer categories. The response categories that most often occur are presented in percentage in Chart 1.

Chart 1. Response categories about educator's perception of Gen Z students



According to the results, it can be concluded that the opinion of the professors about the new generations of students have generally a connotation of dissatisfaction. The behavior of the students in and towards teaching seems inadequate from educator's point of view. They complain that students are less present in class, indifferent to studies, passive, that they cannot provide a conducive atmosphere of teaching. In the 'passive'-category the words "passive" or "less active" appear 14 times or 58.33% which shows even stronger the experience of the educators with the students.

It must be taken into account that 62,50% state that the students have in general poor foundation from previous education. This makes activating students in higher education even more difficult and leads to deficient learning outcomes. Significant formulations from the response category 'Poor foundation from previous education' are shown in Sentence box 1.

Sentence box 1. Significant formulations - Response category 'Poor foundation from previous education'

Poor foundation from previous education; Poor general educational level; General education level is low; Have no study base; Bring reduced quality of knowledge with them; Poor average success in previous education; Mistake of the previous education; Problem comes from previous education.

The occurrence frequency of the negative connoted response categories indicates that the perception of the problems is not limited to individual educators, that they are not only a matter of perception and opinion of the educators but a real

occurrence and that reform and assistance are needed. Educators are looking for ways to activate the students and are aware that something needs to be changed in teaching. They try but hardly succeed or fail. It leads to dissatisfaction and disappointment, even to a feeling that everything is in vain. Statements of 58,33% of the educators about the struggle to activate the students are shown in Sentence box 2.

Sentence box 2. Statements of educators about the struggle to activate the students

<p>I'm struggling to activate them; I need to find ways to motivate them; Interactive teaching is difficult to organize; I have accept them as they are, intelligent but unmovable; I try but I can't change it, they are switched off; They are unwilling to leave the comfort zone; We cannot do anything, it's too late, it's a mistake of the previous education; They are intelligent but do not want to turn on their brains; I carry 10 pens for the students in class hour, because they don't wear some, to write the exercises I give them to activate them; I try to activate them but they can't be moved; The reasons for that should be subject of a deep analysis of the socio-economic conditions and their impact on young people; I try a lot almost in vain; I loose enthusiasm, I can hardly activate them; Other methods are needed to activate them; Prof. need to find a way to motivate them, to interest them, to make a change in the way they teach. It is not enough, If only 1-3 prof change the way of teaching.</p>
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The behavior of the students, which according to the professors originates from the previous education, and the difficulties to change and activate them, lead to a change in the behavior of the professors as well. 62.50% noted that they hat to reduce the criteria for the exams. The overall situation is conditioned by both and leads to a reduction in learning outcomes.

Literature review

The research results from our Faculty coincide with results of other research in education but also with employers' opinion polls on Gen Z. According to Wessel [2] "teachers of Gen Z also note that the performance of the students has decreased, everything has to be immediate and now." German employers [3] come to the conclusion that young people are lazy. According to them 63% of all young people lack motivation, willingness to perform and resilience. In a survey with tutors [4] about their protégés' from Gen Z tutors say that the biggest problem are concentration difficulties, followed by pressure to perform. The main distraction factor from learning is said to be the smartphone (86%). 39,3% of the tutors criticize teaching materials as unsustainable and the "bulimia learning" (short-term memorization of facts for exams or class work). Around 35% consider the teaching methods to be the decisive negative factor.

The negative attitude toward Gen Z originates largely as a result of generational differences. Generational research [5] shows that attitudes towards younger generations cause disconnection and conflicts due to different behavioral models unconscious and automatically acquired and influenced by economic, political, technical and ecological conditions under which they were born and grew up. If educators are not aware of their own models and the models of the generation of their students the problems are inevitable.

In order to understand nowadays students and to align to their needs and way of learning we need to know what makes them tick.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GEN Z

Roughly defined, members of Gen Z were born from 1998 (in many sources approx. 1995) and make up to 30% of the world's population. [6] They are in or entering the faculties and partly on the labor market.

The studies on Generation Z largely coincide internationally in terms of pattern recognition of characteristics. In this article are presented patterns that are relevant for educators.

Under the influence of technical conditions under which they were born and grew up the Gen Zs are more digital than any previous generation. Gen Z members never got to know a world without internet access. [7] Gen Zs don't go online, they live online, mostly with their smart phones, which are virtually fully equipped and enable everyday organization, provide entertainment, orientation, information and are primarily used for digital communication.

Their childhood and adolescence was characterized on the one hand by constant social changes and, on the other hand, by rapid technological changes, so what characterizes them is a certain mellowness. [7] Instant access to facts, data and instructions has been the foundation of childhood for Gen Z. They've grown up with the ability to filter large amounts of information, multitask with ease and focus on the opportunities that will help them make their mark. They gather bits and pieces of information through technology at their fingertips. Because they have been exposed to a constant stream of short segments of information and clips their ability to keep **attention is noticeable shortened**. Students read less than 20% of text and spend 4.4 seconds for every 100 words on the page. They expect answers immediately and often may not want to spend the time to ensure the legitimacy or reliability of the sources they find. [8] Not reading linear texts changed their reading habits. This often reflects to having **problems with ordinary gap-filling tasks** out of a context. One of the ways that Gen Zs **learn best is through "chunking"** of information as opposed to a long-drawn out lecture [8].

Gen Zs have **increased cognitive functions in visual learning ability**. "The brains of Generation Zs have become wired to sophisticated, complex visual imagery. As a result, the part of the brain responsible for visual ability is far more developed, making **visual forms of learning more effective**. Auditory learning (lecture) is very strongly disliked." [8 p.3] According to a Pearson study [9] 59% of Gen Zs prefer to learn by watching YouTube videos, and 55% also say YouTube has contributed to their education, learning, and/or personal development. They are open to **incorporating virtual reality into their experience** (60%) through an immersive educational approach that provides **practical experience** in their chosen field. [10] Interactive games, collaborative projects, advance organizers, challenges, and anything that they can try and see is appreciated [8]

The easy access to information creates an **expectation of instant results and constant feedback**. [8] Students today expect instantaneous feedback and customized learning assignments that are engaging and allow them to progress at their own pace.

User-generated content is preferred by Gen Zs and 35% believe that in the future it will have more credibility than content created by education institutions. They seek for **personalization** in higher education which is assumed and generally viewed as more effective by 38% of them. [10]

Gen Zs don't make a great distinction between the offline and online world. Studies show that they put a **high value on face-to-face interaction and group learning, both on- and offline** [11]. According to Pearson [9] 57% of Gen Zs prefer in-person activities with classmates. Zimmer [11] found that eight out of ten Gen Zs prefer to study with friends, often virtually using interactive multimedia. She notes that the most helpful tools for learning for Gen Zs in this order are Class discussions, Working through problems/concepts, Study guides, Textbooks Test review sessions, working in small groups, homework and notes available online [11].

Valuable to know for educators are also two "strange" characteristics observed by Gen Z members. They feel "entitled" [12] After that they have the unconditional right to something in all situations without having to work for it or having accomplished something. **They think that they automatically get the legal claim through the existence of their own person.** If they are not sufficiently engaged in classroom they think it is enough to only be passively present in class to pass exams (or even just because they are enrolled in the faculty). Regarding exams and grades, they would even see it as positive if everyone gets almost the same grade. For Gen Zs **avoiding competition** is part of feeling good as well as everything that promotes a pleasant group atmosphere. [12]

Gen Zs are anything but passive learners. The report from Barnes & Noble College [11] shows that Gen Z predominantly **learns by doing** and prefers **active learning environments**. They just aren't in tune with traditional, passive instructional sources, like printed textbooks, nor do they have the patience for long drawn out explanations of concepts and theories. [8]

“They want the professor to be a guide,[...]But not just any guide. They want professors who are enthusiastic, involve students in their learning, understand them, and most of all, give feedback quickly on assignments.” [13 p.27]

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING GEN Z STUDENTS AND TOURISM STUDENTS IN PARTICULAR

Discussion

The attitudes and tendencies of the students are not congruent with those expected by educators. The results about educators and employees perception of Gen Z members compared to the results about Gen Z's characteristics show a mismatch. The discordance of aspirations, expectations and demands due to generational differences lead to disconnection. Educators have the impression that students don't want to learn, are passive, not interested and Gen Zs on the other hand are active if their visual ability to learn is considered, if content and tasks are personalized, if practical experience and learning by doing is provided. This leads to using inappropriate methods to motivate and activate the students and thus to deficient results and learning outcomes.

In the center of education are the students. The purpose of education is to educate young people. We educators have to adapt to them. We have to be aware of our unconsciously and automatically acquired generational models and be aware that Gen Z's models are different to ours. It is to us to adapt to their way of learning, find ways to motivate and stimulate them and in this way open the opportunity to achieve the expected results.

We educators in higher education belong to prior generations which as students had to visit the library or to buy books. It is understandable that we prefer reading and listening to lectures to process information. Educators view technology as a tool to research and present information in a visual manner like Power Point Presentations. Gen Z's have grown up with the advantage of technology and to learn whatever, whenever, and wherever. They prefer self-paced and interactive learning. [14] They see technology as a tool to communicate and interact with others including as a method to demonstrate their understanding through multimodal interactions. The students have to be actively involved in using technology, not just watching an educator use technology. [15]

„ In assessing and appreciating the student’s characteristics, educators can leverage the students' strengths to success. Faculty can no longer afford to approach the teaching–learning process as the sole teacher lecturing with one-way transmission of knowledge while the learner just memorizes the information.” [14 p.254]

The students' lack of interest, their passivity in class and non-attendance in class are related to the students generally and they are pointed out by a very large percentage of the surveyed professors. The behavior and attitude of students towards the studies cannot be changed if only a few of the professors change to a Gen Z’s-centered approach. The influence of the previous education has, according to the results, an effect to the apathy. Therefore the change should take place in the entire higher education and by most professors. Only then it can have an impact on the students, activate them and thus improve the learning outcomes.

Recommendations for higher education teaching

There is a need in higher education to shift towards a student-centered active learning model with personalized interactive and creative ways of embracing technology inside and outside the classroom. The recommendations also apply to situations of pure online teaching as in the situation of the pandemic with COVID-19.

Technology should not marginalize or replace the classroom. Gen Z learners still value their educators. 78 % say that teachers are important to their learning and development [9], but more as a coach or mentor who supports the learner in making decisions instead of telling him what to do. Students want faculty in the classroom since educators are the experts of their disciplines and field of studies and are critical to facilitating discussions and applications of the content at hand.[8] Digital content is not seen as a substitute for the lecture, but as a supplement and an extension [1]

Briefly summarized Gen Zs learn best through active engagement like experience-based, problem-solving and project-based learning, self-directed and in groups, with multitasking, visual multimedia, “chunking”, personalized and

real life relevant content, with involvement in the development of content and expect instant results / constant feedback. Educators should:

- Break material down into short sequences (only a few minutes long) visual representations, static or dynamic,
- Share online resources,
- Provide video learning materials, searchable video and video that students can annotate,
- Connect content and tasks with real world experiences and Gen Z real life,
- Organize structured forms of working teams that emphasizes student preparation out of class and application of knowledge in class,
- Integrate interactive multimedia and multitasking out and in class,
- Integrate mobile delivery capabilities out and in class,
- Incorporate independent multimodal interactions and use of technology,
- Allow to research things and make mistakes,
- Integrate problem based collaborative trial and error assignments,
- Hold students responsible for information gathering in and outside the classroom,
- Ask for an end product (virtual multimodal presentation, game),
- Ask for multimedia demonstration of knowledge as teacher,
- Use class time for active learning activities and discussions,
- Generate discussions and debates in class,
- Let teams develop content out and in classroom,
- Let teams develop virtual games like quizzes out and in classroom.

To get to know Gen Zs better before- and after-class conversations can be initiated to learn more about them as persons and about experiences they may bring out about learning.

Examples for content and tasks for tourism students

In this chapter are given some guidelines and ideas which can be implemented for tourism students with taking into account the previous general recommendations.

Generation Z is progressively taking the center stage in tourism industry, as traveler and financiers of the future.

„The future growth of tourism will depend to some extent on how well the industry understands the social and demographic trends influencing traveler behavior.“[16 p.128]

As educators of tourism students we have in classroom the future traveler and the ones who will be responsible in and for the future of the tourism industry. We should use this fact in teaching no matter what subject of the field we teach. We can adjust content to be linked to Gen Zs and to our subject of teaching.

Travel has a high priority among young people. According to the „Booking.com“ study[17]Gen Z prefers to spend money on travel rather than on material possessions.In the survey, 65 % of Gen Zs said that traveling and seeing the world was the most important reason to spend money.

Gen Z sees trips as tools capable of enriching them, of having an impact on their lives and identities. Research results [18] show a trend from undifferentiated mass tourism to more variable custom-tailored experiences. Tourism industry is working on ways to reach Gen Zs and to align offers to them.

„The rise of internet as dominant medium has engendered several significant transformations that affect the tourist experience and will condition the future development of the sector, in terms of both demand and supply.“ [18 p.11]

This facts are a great opportunity for the student-oriented approach and involving Gen Z students in content and tasks closely related to their field of study, to real life, to their interests and expectations.New technologies have made it possible the customize tourist experiences and customize teaching content and tasks.

The following are examples for tasks or projects, content and guidelines for student-centered teaching of Gen Z tourism students:

- Presenting and developing customized tourism offers for Gen Z,
- Examining the interests of one's own generation in relation to travel,
- Making calculations for trips appropriate for Gen Z,
- Working with and presenting destinations appropriate for Gen Z,
- Investigating the impact of Gen Z on the tourism industry,
- Making promotions, ads, suitable for Gen Z,
- Creating online promotions suitable for Gen Z,

- Instead of requiring classic seminar papers, requiring multimodal virtual “papers” on suitable topics. Students should present their thoughts and content through visual representations, videos, “chunked” in sequences. They prefer for example to record a video rather than spend hours to write up a formal document. For a virtual „paper” they would also have to find and learn information about the topic.
- Letting students to simulate and solve problems, like problems with accommodation, payment etc.
- Letting students to develop quizzes and games, which will be solved in class or online about the subject - for example „What kind of tourist are Gen Z?” (Kahoot is a program for solving quizzes by all students at the same time in class that intensively engages them.)

The tasks should ask for an end-product through which the students create multimodal in groups on and offline, construct their own knowledge and present it to the others. The content of the subject should, so far as possible, be connected with examples for Gen Zs, to provide purpose.

Phones should be used in class to find information, to compare, discuss and process, to guide their thinking, to comment on sources, to develop critical thinking, to support learning through mistakes, to develop desire to investigate the environment and for immediate social and result satisfaction.

Educators should establish a collaborative learning culture that is supported by technology. We often understand use of technology for presenting and memorization of information, for electronic worksheets or for completing prescribed learning activities and for other teacher-driven activities. Gen Zs appropriate use of technology for student-led activities using multimodal interactions to construct their own knowledge. [19]

CONCLUSION

Educators must collaborate with learners to understand one another and make changes in the learning environment. In higher education, learners need to develop both intellectually and personally to become productive citizens. Assessing the learner characteristics, reflecting on the context of which Gen Zs learn and becoming interactive with today's students rather than only reacting to

learners, leads to a more learner-centered environment. [14]Teaching of Gen Z students demands a student-centered approach as the only possible way to develop skills, abilities and knowledge, promote self-expression and keep students motivated during the whole period of studies.

Finding appropriate teaching approaches and developing materials and tasks with multimodal personalized use of technology means that educators have to be always at least one step ahead of the times and constantly learn how to adapt in the didactical process. Most educators in higher education are not trained in didactics and not trained to use technology in teaching. They need constant support and training in organized manner. Faculties, Universities and the Ministry of Education should consider this need and provide further education opportunities to train for teaching methodology and use of technology.

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