Chapter 5

What’s Seen and Unseen: The Gen Z Experience in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Using the authors’ varied experiences in the classroom with Gen Z and the next generation on its way, this chapter investigates an urgent and often unseen issue for students in higher education. With increased pressure to perform, a tension between time and technology, and lasting impacts from the Great Recession, Gen Z students suffer from a growing number of mental health issues. College coursework should challenge students; however, Gen Z often becomes impaired by what is a real and prevalent anxiety. The authors explore the ways Gen Z operates in the classroom, potential causes for this crisis, and solutions to improve Gen Z experiences in our institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Students in our higher institution courses face serious economic, academic, cultural, and personal challenges. As members of Generation Z they grew up during the Great Recession, a longer and deeper economic downturn than Americans had known for 70 years, the scope of which reached across the socioeconomic spectrum (Ariel, 2013). As a result, our students’ families are more likely than in the past to have experienced the loss of employment, secure housing, and food sources. They also belong to the first generation to grow up entirely in the age of the internet with the associated pressures of near-constant digital engagement and the concurrent distractions of social media, texting, and video gaming. They’ve been educated in an era of ever-ratcheting academic expectations and high stakes testing, and they’re more likely than ever before to have been victims of gun violence and/or sexual assault. Perhaps as result of one or more of these causes, in 2018, one in four college students had been diagnosed with anxiety (Lipka, 2018).

BACKGROUND

As authors and educators, we approach this topic from opposite ends of the spectrum of experience. One of us (Ana Maria) has no children and has been teaching writing to adults—baby boomers and Generation X students—for many years. The other (Claudia) has three children, two millennials and one a member of Generation Z, and has been teaching Gen Z students for a decade. Yet, our similar observations lead us to conclude that today’s young adults face challenges that should be acknowledged and addressed with urgency. In both our situations, we notice an increased anxiety concerning the level of work required. We notice that students grow quiet when they feel they can’t or don’t understand. Too often, they suffer from the isolating envy of negatively comparing themselves to others. Twenge (2017) asserts that Gen Z is on the verge of the most severe mental health crisis for young people in decades, and it’s not surprising. In this chapter, we unconventionally and intentionally choose to share our experiences in first person to highlight personal insights and the vulnerable voices of Gen Z. We offer possible solutions and suggestions for continued research for moving towards more hopeful and happier outcomes for Gen Z students.
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