



Connecting with Generation Z: Approaches in Nursing Education^{1,2}



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ABSTRACT

Generation Z, a unique and truly digital native generation, is now entering college and the workplace. This article identifies generational influences and distinctive characteristics of this group, which may challenge nurse educators and require changes in teaching–learning design strategies and approaches. Specific educational suggestions and ways to support members of Generation Z in higher education and the workplace are offered.

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Introduction

Nursing literature frequently describes the attributes and characteristics of Millennial students, the generation born in the early 1980s through the mid-1990s (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Shatto & Erwin, 2016). Faculty often turn to this information as a guide to direct teaching and learning approaches or to provide suggestions for how to interact and effectively lead this generation of students. However, a new generation of students, Generation Z, born between the mid-1990s and ending around 2012 (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Shatto & Erwin, 2016; Turner, 2015; Twenge, 2017) are entering nursing programs and the workplace. This emerging generation brings some of the same characteristics as Millennials, the previous generation of students, but they also possess some differences. Generation Z students have a unique combination of attitudes, beliefs, social norms, and behaviors that will impact education and practice for many years. Nurse educators must understand how this new generation of learners think, what they are concerned with and care about, and how they prefer to interact so that they can determine how to most effectively engage and guide these students and nurses (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Shatto & Erwin, 2016; Turner, 2015; Twenge, 2017).

The dates used to define a generation are somewhat arbitrary (Twenge, 2017). Usually common economic, social, and cultural con-

ditions and contextual factors define a generation and influence the generational culture (Rickes, 2016; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Generation Z is influenced by technology related events, such as the public availability of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s, the explosion of handheld technologies, including smartphones, cyber attacks, and cyber bullying. They have also been impacted by the attacks and aftermath of September 11, public violence, an increase in unemployment, the economy crash, and the world at war (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Shatto & Erwin, 2016, 2017; Twenge, 2017). These factors, along with being raised by skeptical Generation X parents (Wiedmer, 2015), have created a new cautious generation. The purpose of this article is to describe common attributes of Generation Z, discuss how Generation Z characteristics influence nursing education programs and nursing workplace practices, and offer possible supportive teaching–learning design strategies that can be used by educators to replace some current approaches that are not attractive to the Generation Z student.

Characterizing Generation Z

Attributes of Generation Z

Who exactly is Generation Z? Literature regarding this generation is still emerging (Twenge, 2017), and some authors disagree on the exact dates defining this generation; however, in general, Generation Z includes those born beginning in 1995. Coincidentally, this date aligns with the approximate time when the World Wide Web became publicly available. Ending dates for this generation are usually reported through the early 2010s (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge,

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2017). Generation Z represents a sizable group comprising approximately 24% of the United States population (Twenge, 2017). Although a universally adopted name for this group has yet to be agreed upon, there are various names currently used in the literature, including Generation Z, iGen, digital natives, net Generation, iGeneration, Gen Next, I Gen, Gen Tech, Gen Wii, Post Gen, and Plurals (Igel & Urquhart, 2012; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Turner, 2015; Twenge, 2017; Wiedmer, 2015). For ease of reading, the term *Generation Z* will be used in this article to refer to this generation.

Various characteristics of Generation Z were identified in the literature (Igel & Urquhart, 2012; Loveland, 2017; Rickes, 2016; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Shatto & Erwin, 2016, 2017; Spears, Zobac, Spillane, & Thomas, 2015; Turner, 2015; Twenge, 2017). Members of this group are avid consumers of technology and cravers of the digital world. As true digital natives and the only generation raised exclusively with a technology influence, Generation Z is highly accustomed to interacting, sometimes solely, in the digital world. Because of their frequent technology use, they have underdeveloped social and relationship skills and are at increased risk for isolation, insecurity, and mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. Their technology habits lead them to demonstrate a limited attention span, and they bore easily when they perceive monotony and repetition. Generation Z desires convenience and immediacy. Members of Generation Z are also pragmatic. Having grown up in times of social, political, and economic uncertainty, this generation is cautious and concerned with emotional, physical, and financial safety. Although Generation Z are racially and ethnically diverse and open-minded, they generally do not take an active role in social issues instead preferring to engage in sedentary activism. Table 1 outlines the nine Generation Z characteristics identified from the literature (Igel & Urquhart, 2012; Loveland, 2017; Rickes, 2016; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Shatto & Erwin, 2016, 2017; Spears et al., 2015; Turner, 2015; Twenge, 2017).

Although Millennials are skilled with technology, members of Generation Z are the true digital natives who do not know the world without the Internet (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2017). Their daily lives are completely saturated with the digital environment. Shatto and Erwin (2016) report that Generation Z spends an average of 9 hour per day on their cell phones. In addition, research suggests that the common events and contextual factors experienced by Generation Z have led to more practical, cautious, and skeptical youths (Twenge, 2017). Unlike the confident, achieving Millennials, Generation Z are not sure they will succeed, take fewer risks, and are likely to have a back-up plan in case things do not work out (Twenge, 2017). Nurse educators need to recognize and consider the differences in these generations to successfully engage and guide students and nurses.

Cautions

As this group enters college, educators are still learning about these students with data regarding Generation Z still emerging (Twenge, 2017). It is additionally important to recognize the stereotypical nature of generational conversations. In other words, not all learners will align with these generalizations as the information presented is based on averages, not absolutes (Philip & Garcia, 2013; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2017). It is important to recognize and validate differences in Generation Z. These generational labels provide context for understanding these groups and beginning conversations. In addition, these generational differences can be the foundation from which to develop appropriate interventions and approaches for interaction. However, they may need to be tailored for classroom, clinical, or individual needs. Moreover, educators must remember that learners, especially in associate degree programs, will come from many generations. A variety of teaching–learning design strategies and approaches are advised to meet all student needs.

Teaching–Learning Suggestions to Support Generation Z

Traditionally, nursing programs schedule classroom and clinical time in very structured ways. Even though some faculty are incorporating some active learning strategies, higher education is still typically dominated by a rigid curriculum that employs teacher-centered, passive teaching–learning strategies, such as lecture and textbook reading, to convey information (Rickes, 2016; Shatto & Erwin, 2016). Students are often expected to complete large amounts of readings, class content may be presented using PowerPoint, and evaluation frequently consists of multiple-choice tests. Clinical learning experiences occur in the health care environment and may involve students working with patients under the supervision of a faculty mentor. Simulation may augment and/or replace clinical time. Considering the identified characteristics of Generation Z, these traditional nursing education program approaches and delivery methods are not optimal in meeting the needs of this upcoming generation. If educators continue delivery as done in the past, they may encounter challenges in aligning with the new generation needs (Carter, Creedy, & Sidebotham, 2016; Rickes, 2016; Shatto & Erwin, 2016, 2017).

Like many adult learners, Generation Z students want practical and relevant information. However, Generation Z students also desire learning that is individualized, immediate, exciting, engaging, technologically advanced, and visually based. Table 1 suggests specific teaching–learning design strategies and approaches to support Generation Z by identified generational characteristic (Carter et al., 2016; Holtschneider, 2017; Igel & Urquhart, 2012; Lang, 2016; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Phillips, 2016; Rickes, 2016; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Shatto & Erwin, 2016, 2017; Spears et al., 2015; Turner, 2015; Twenge, 2017). Not all suggestions must be employed, instead the teaching–learning design strategies provided in Table 1 offer options for altering nursing education approaches. Faculty could consider replacing a traditional approach with a suggested alternative and evaluating the effectiveness of these new strategies. Faculty are not expected to use all of these activities but could select items that best address learning needs, tackle problem learning areas, or help to more effectively engage these students.

Given the reliance on technology by this wired generation, faculty need to consider how to harness technology to enhance and supplement education. It will not replace good pedagogical practices but can be used to augment teaching. Use of available software, electronic learning materials, and Internet-guided learning activities are some strategies that may help to engage these students. They will learn by viewing digital images and not solely by reading text. Therefore, educators may want to embed visually based content along with their traditional teaching materials. Trying new delivery approaches, such as an infographic syllabus addendum, conveying information through digital storytelling with pictures or videos, or the use of emojis to gather feedback may be attractive options to consider that capture the attention of this group of students. For example, items usually presented on a syllabus in text format could be replaced with visual diagrams or images that convey the same information, or, a simple one- or two-page infographic syllabus addendum can be added to existing syllabi to visually represent important class expectations, assignments, grading, or course schedule (Mocek, 2017). Research has shown that infographic syllabi addendums can help improve student retention of key information and increase student engagement (Mocek, 2017).

Classrooms may need to shift from teacher dissemination of information to a focus on more learning that is self-directed, individualized, or project based so that students engage in relevant learning activities. To capture the attention of Generation Z students, faculty must use active, learner-centered, immersive, multidimensional approaches to ensure optimal learning achievement (Philip & Garcia,

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