

HERE WE ARE, NOW ENTERTAIN US:
ONE (ELDER) MILLENNIAL'S THOUGHTS ON
METHODS AND MEANS OF CONNECTING WITH
GEN Z IN THE LEGAL WRITING CLASSROOM

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Introduction

Being an elder millennial somewhat close in age to many of my 1L students, the majority of whom qualify as Gen Z, I naturally assumed I would relate to and understand what they needed and wanted in legal education, and in the legal writing classroom, specifically. I was wrong. Gen Z members are unique, gifted, and complex—and in ways very different from my generation, or any generation before that. Who they are informs what they need, want, and expect in a legal education. It also informs how they prefer and need to learn. This presentation compiles research and information on Gen Z. It offers legal writing professors ideas for how to adapt teaching and assessments to effectively connect with Gen Z, all while maintaining substance in teaching fundamental legal writing skills.

Who is Gen Z?

Challenges persist in trying to define a generation. While many of our students—and especially those recently or immediately out of college—may technically qualify as members of Gen Z, that fact is not to

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suggest that all members of Gen Z are the same, or share the same attributes, or exhibit the same traits or characteristics. Far from it. Nor would it be fair to assume that all of our students, in terms of age alone, *are* Gen Z students. So while it may be inaccurate to assume all of our students are similar, or more alike than not, we can still explore who these students are using some broad criteria that studies have shown apply to a significant segment of Gen Z.

Gen Z are those born between approximately 1995 and 2010.² They are diverse, with almost half of Gen Z members identifying as non-white.³ They are also “digital natives,” most of whom have never not known the internet.⁴ At home and in the classroom, they are tethered to technology and devices. iPhones, iPads, laptops, and multiple screens—these are often as much appendages as they are tools for learning. As such, they are highly visual learners.⁵ But that technology has also created ill effects. In part because of their reliance on technology, Gen Z members have short attention spans, which some estimate to be about only 8 seconds.⁶ That reliance on technology, coupled with the way they were taught to learn as children, has hampered their critical thinking skills.⁷

Gen Z has also been through an awful lot. The oldest Gen Z members would have grown up in a post-9/11 world, practiced active shooter drills in school, consumed a flood of often negative images from a 24-hour news cycle, navigated youth in a social media-infused world, and possibly watched their families struggle economically in the aftermath of the Great Recession.⁸ And that is to speak nothing of the many members of Gen Z who spent considerable time—semesters, if not longer—of their education in a covid and post-covid world. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that they are also financially conservative.⁹ Having navigated their youths

² Laura P. Graham, *Generation Z Goes to Law School: Teaching and Reaching Law Students in the Post-Millennial Generation*, 41 U. Ark. Little Rock L. Rev. 29, 37 (2018).

³ *See id.* at 40.

⁴ Robert Minarcin, *OK Boomer – The Approaching DiZruption of Legal Education by Generation Z*, 39 Quinnipiac L. Rev. 29, 31 (2020).

⁵ *See* Olivia R. Smith Schlinck, *OK, Zoomer: Teaching Legal Research to Gen Z*, 115 Law Libr. J. 269 (2023).

⁶ *See* Graham, *supra* note 2, at 52.

⁷ *See generally id.* at 57-66; *see also* Kimberly Carlton Bonner, *What do judges need to know about Gen Z?*, 106 *Judicature* 56, 58 (2024).

⁸ *See generally* Minarcin, *supra* note 4, at 54-55.

⁹ *See id.*; *see also* Graham, *supra* note 1, at 41-42.

and educations in a time of growing macro- and microeconomic financial instability, as well as in an era where education has never been more necessary, or expensive, Gen Z necessarily sees law school as an investment that must deliver and pay dividends.¹⁰

In spite of all Gen Z has been through, or perhaps because of it, Gen Z is also “altruistic” and “civic minded.”¹¹ They want the world to be a better place, and they see themselves as agents of positive change.¹² For Gen Z, social justice is a necessary goal. Many enter law school intending to pursue work in the public sector and “do good.” Ideas like mental health, safe spaces, and work-life balance aren’t just corporate buzzwords, but are worthy, necessary, and achievable ends.

How Does Gen Z Prefer to Learn?

Knowing who or what Gen Z is, what then does that suggest about how they want or prefer to learn? Studies support my experience that who Gen Z is very much informs their pedagogical preferences. One anchoring principle is that Gen Z wants and needs to see value and purpose in their education.¹³ Considering the financial and time investments they are making in their education, Gen Z needs to know that what they are learning is practical, applicable, and translatable to the real world. They want learning and experience in law school to reflect learning and experience in the real world. Esoteric concepts like “learning how to think like a lawyer” are less relevant than being able to do the actual work and make a meaningful impact. Given they are highly visual learners familiar with technology, they welcome and thrive on technology in the classroom. They find group work effective but see group work differently than do many older generations. For Gen Z, a mixture of individual, small group, and larger class work can be effective means of learning.¹⁴

Gen Z also wants frequent and thorough feedback. And not unlike many millennials, they might resist negative or punitive feedback.¹⁵ They want to know how to improve, and they see their professors as “guides

¹⁰ See Minarcin, *supra* note 4, at 54.

¹¹ See Bonner, *supra* note 7, at 58.

¹² See Schlinck, *supra* note 5, at 283.

¹³ See *id.* at 287.

¹⁴ See Graham, *supra* note 1, at 85-89.

¹⁵ See Schlinck, *supra* note 5, at 286-87.

rather than authorities” on that journey.¹⁶ Conferences and one-on-one, in-person feedback are paramount, but they don’t see the need for lengthy meetings.

Lastly, as an altruistic and civic-minded group who has lived through much, Gen Z also craves an academic environment that accounts for their mental health and well-being. They want engaged professors who create classrooms that are accepting, accessible, and reflective of the real world.

Adapting the Legal Writing Classroom to Account for Gen Z Without Sacrificing Substance

Taking stock of who Gen Z is and how they prefer to learn, what does that mean for our work in the legal writing classroom? It would be a mistake to change everything we do to account for a single generation or their learning preferences. Still, we can make simple yet effective changes and retain the core of all we need to teach while doing the most to account for the characteristics and learning preferences of one of our largest student demographics. By looking at six criteria, we can more effectively connect with Gen Z without compromising the core and substance of legal writing we need to teach.

Demonstrate Real World Applicability. First, legal writing professors should work to connect course material and assessments to the real world. By using real cases and transactions as the basis for assessments, and by incorporating our own experience into the classroom, professors can best demonstrate how an assessment (1) relates to actual practice and (2) will help prepare students for the work they will do once they graduate. Taking course material out of the realm of the abstract can do much to show students that their investment in their legal education will meaningfully and quantifiably deliver in the near future.

Revisit Traditional Assessments. Professors should also explore revisiting “traditional” assessments. For instance, rather than assigning just a memo in draft and final form, professors can incorporate

¹⁶ *Id.* at 286.

scaffolding assignments, shorter assignments (including pass/fail assignments), and reflection or journaling assignments into the standard curriculum of any given semester. Doing so would accomplish much while sacrificing little. First, giving students more and varied assessments would reflect trial and error in learning that lawyers encounter in practice. The real world rarely assesses lawyers on a single task, and the legal writing classroom should be no different. Second, adding these assignments would afford students more opportunities for writing. Scaffolding assignments—those where a student writes and receives a grade and feedback for a smaller part of a larger assignment—give students practice and opportunities to learn in a low-stakes setting. Lastly, and anecdotally, students want more assessments and more opportunities for practice. Going beyond “just the memo” would do much to get students practice ready and meet the learning needs and desires of Gen Z.

Diversify Feedback and Promote Communication. If professors use multiple, smaller assessments as noted above, they will necessarily provide opportunity for more feedback. Gen Z wants to improve, and they look to their professors as guides to help them become capable attorneys. Offering more feedback on a variety of assignments will accomplish much at minimal cost. Frequent feedback allows students to know the professor’s goals and how students can improve. Varied forms of feedback, including written and oral feedback, as well as individual conferences, can help show Gen Z not only how they can improve, but that we as professors are invested in that process and their success.

Incorporate Technology. Having grown up with technology, Gen Z is comfortable using and expects to use technology in the classroom. Moreover, given their short attention spans, using technology in the classroom will likely keep them more engaged. PowerPoint is an obvious baseline. And covid teaching nightmares aside, Zoom is an effective and easy tool that we can incorporate with ease. Using Zoom for things like prerecorded lectures allows students to learn on their own and at their own pace. Using Zoom for assessments, such as a mock client interview, will give students experience working with an increasingly prevalent

communication medium they will need to master in the real world. Other tools like iClicker and Socrative can also break up monotony and foster engagement.

Foster Classroom Engagement. Enthusiasm goes far in the eyes of Gen Z. While a “boring” professor can still be a “good” professor, Gen Z believes that if they are making the investment in their legal education, those guiding them through the process must be engaged and committed to their learning and their success. Lecture, by itself, is often ineffective. Assuming the material is relevant and relatable, incorporating video, live polling, pictures, and even memes can be an effective way to change pace and create classroom engagement.

Acknowledge and Promote Diversity. Lastly, though significantly, professors should work to acknowledge and promote diversity in the classroom. Gen Z’s world is diverse, and the legal writing classroom should reflect that. Where possible, professors should explore ways of advancing discussions of larger social, political, or racial issues beyond just the mechanics of legal writing. Professors can broach issues that may be at stake in topics students write about, even if those issues are not the main focus. For instance, students writing a memo on the shopkeeper’s privilege defense to a claim of wrongful imprisonment can discuss how the law has developed around what courts say constitutes a “reasonable belief that a theft has occurred.” While still learning to write, students can explore how race or socioeconomics informs this area of law. These might be sensitive subjects, but experience has shown students are eager to have the discussion.

Conclusion

In our evolving academic world, Gen Z’s distinctive approach to life and the law presents both challenges and opportunities. Their unique attributes demand that we blend innovation and substance to rethink our “traditional” methods. By adapting thoughtfully, we can better teach and connect with Gen Z while maintaining the core tenants of legal writing.