Applying the Learning Cycle to Generation Z

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Abstract:
As Generation Z begins college, we note that they are soon to be in our workplaces, academies, and training programs. How are we supposed to teach this new generation of learners that uses technology as naturally as breathing? Are you up to the challenge?

The good news is that by combining some principles of adult learning with the learning cycle and Generation Z’s learning preferences, we will be able to reach and teach them. As instructors, we must embrace the new technologies and prepare to meet this new generation somewhere in the middle between our two worlds.

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You’ve likely heard of Generation Z, also called the Digital Natives, because they use technology as naturally as breathing. This generation ranges in age from 4 to 19 years old, and they are different in the way that they access, absorb, interpret, process, and use information. They are also different in how they interact and communicate with others.

Gen Z grew up with the Internet, cell phones, and iPods and have always known how to zoom, pinch, and swipe. They are rarely without a cell phone or tablet in their hands and tend to communicate via instant messaging, internet chat, or social media instead of direct contact with people. In their world, images on a screen are supposed to be interacted with, manipulated, or modified. They prefer color graphics and images over text and use several different texting “slanguages” (OMG, LOL) or emoji alphabets (picture words) to keep conversations private.

The challenge of teaching this generation of learners is not lost on today’s instructors; the good news for them is that by combining some principles of adult learning with the learning cycle and Generation Z’s learning preferences, they will be able to teach them. And they will be able to
get this generation engaged in learning without throwing out everything they already know and do.

There are several key principles of adult learning that instructors can utilize in targeting this audience. The first one is making connections. In order to learn new material, the learner will need to make a connection between what is already known and the new information being presented. Next, the instructor should consider what previous knowledge and experiences the learners bring to his class. These will determine the “what” learners will learn and also the how, where, when, and why of things. The third principle is to differentiate between learning opportunities and activities that allow them lots of time for guided and independent practice. They will need to use repeated activities over extended periods of time. If students don’t “get it” the first time, instructors will need to give them frequent practice time with lots of feedback so they can do it correctly and at normal speed. The fourth principle of adult learning is to give immediate feedback on and reinforcement of their physical and cognitive efforts. Such feedback should tell them what they did right, provide suggestions for improvement, and, if possible, offer rewards or incentives for task mastery.

The next level takes these principles of adult learning and combines them with some basic concepts from the 4MAT© learning cycle, also referred to as McCarthy’s learning styles classified by the Learner Type Measure (LTM). What follows is a brief overview of 4MAT© and how the four learner types are represented as you teach around the learning cycle.

**Quadrant One** is based on communication or understanding the “why” of things. Answering “why” leads to finding personal meaning which is the start of learning. When learners can connect past experiences to the new content, they create meaning for themselves and are ready to learn. By connecting learners to a concept, they can then share, discuss, and reflect on their experiences. In combining connections with attending, an instructor engages both sides of the learner’s brain. Key words for Type One learners are *feelings* and *reflecting*.

**Quadrant Two** is based on critical thinking or understanding the “what” of things. Students build on the activity in quadrant one and add their own images, music, or other visualizations to help prepare them for the expert knowledge, content, or research of that lesson. By combining visuals (images) with words (inform), the instructor can engage both sides of the learner’s brain. Key words for Type Two learners are *thinking* and *reflecting (watching)*.

**Quadrant Three** is based on collaborative problem solving or understanding the “how does this work” of things. This learner type is a hands-on learner who will often take responsibility for his own learning. Instructors must create practice sets so students build technical expertise to use in real world problem solving. When you combine practice (practical or cognitive exercises) with extend (collaborative problem solving), both sides of the learner’s brain are engaged. Key words for Type Three learners are *thinking* (concepts) and *acting* (doing).
**Quadrant Four** is based on creativity or understanding the “if or what if” of things. Students refine and fine-tune their learning performances, whether it is physical or cognitive (left brain), by using rubrics co-created by students and instructors. The right brain is engaged when students present their performances as described in the rubric and show ways that the project has been integrated into their real life and the community-at-large. Key words for Type Four learners are acting (doing) and feeling/ experiencing.

When travelling the learning cycle and teaching to the whole brain, an instructor gets more complete learning. Our traditional education system concentrates on the left brain in linear, sequential, left-to-right, top-to-bottom, and beginning-to-end organization. The focus has always been on memorization and testing using traditional true/false, multiple choice, and fill in the blank items. Typical training program objectives contain lower order thinking skills (LOTS) such as: identify, define, explain, describe, list, etc. While this met the needs of the nineteenth and twentieth century learners, it will be insufficient for what the twenty-first century will require of Generation Z and beyond. Future education will engage the right brain in problem solving, pattern analysis, “big picture” thinking, creativity, making connections, synthesizing, and making sense out of things. The focus must be on critical thinking, problem solving, collecting and analyzing data, and collaboration. Testing will incorporate rubrics co-created by students and instructors, guided and independent practice activities, and practical exercises and will be evaluated by feedback and check sheets. Training program objectives should contain performance-driven, higher order thinking skills (HOTS) such as: analyze, compare, verify, critique, select, create, develop, etc.

To be successful in the twenty-first century, we need to think about changing our instructional approach, to shift away from the “stand and deliver,” lecture-based, left brain approach and toward discovery learning. “Telling” takes the discovery and motivation out of learning. When we tell students the “whole story,” there is no reason for them to locate information and hone skills. They know if they wait long enough, the instructor will give them everything they need to know; it also keeps them dependent on the instructor.

We need to learn to “teach lazy” and to move away from being the expert “sage on the stage” to, rather, a facilitator of learning or the “guide on the side.” We need to let students collaborate and create real world products or find solutions to a problem. Our job is to show them how to be more effective with what they do even when they may create things or solutions that we never thought were possible.

This Generation Z lives in a different culture from us—a visual, multimedia, hyperlinked culture. Their work will reflect more of a focus on HOTS, critical thinking, problem solving, and twenty-first century influences as well as the traditional LOTS.

We must build a bridge between our world and theirs. Change is no longer measured in centuries or decades. Knowledge growth is now measured in hours, seconds, and nano-seconds.
When change happens faster than we can accept it, we instinctively want to hang on to our traditional ways and teach within our comfort zone. However, as instructors, we must embrace the new technologies and prepare to meet this new generation somewhere in the middle between our two worlds.