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Behind the Mask: Teaching Gen Z as One of Its Own

By Ariel Newman

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Unlike my colleagues, there is one key characteristic I share with incoming students who are members of Generation Z:¹ I am one of them. As a new law librarian and legal research professor, the Fall 2021 semester was my first time teaching Introduction to Legal Research. While developing content for the course was demanding for someone in my position, my ability to understand and connect with students greatly aided this process. While I recognize that some of these challenges are not new,² the reactions to these issues—such as methods of addressing different relationships with technology and life experiences—may require additional reflection based on the unique characteristics of Gen Z.³ After my experience teaching Gen Z as a member of that same generation, I want to share some advice with my colleagues who are also pioneering an environment of students from this generation.

Rule #1: Emphasize (and then emphasize again) the process. There is a phrase I included in my syllabus (in bold) that I belabored during class: “Think of the legal research process as a circle.” Despite this, the most common question asked throughout the course was, “Am I doing this right?” In their daily lives,

members of Gen Z appreciate imagination, creativity, and ingenuity. In the classroom, Gen Z students demand structure, rules, and clarity.

While I informed my students that some research methods are more effective than others, I routinely reminded them that there is no single “right” way to conduct legal research. Gen Z students are often focused on the results, not the process.⁴ This generation is a highly competitive one,⁵ especially in the law school environment. Students are so focused on getting the “right” answer that they ignore the importance of the process and the skills they are meant to develop. My advice to my multi-generational colleagues is to recognize this barrier and seize it as a teaching opportunity. Encourage your Gen Z students to embrace individuality through their research methods. I told every one of my students, “Your research process looks different from mine, and that’s okay.” It’s important to remind students that they have the freedom to mold their research process into something that is uniquely their own.

Rule #2: Use technology to your advantage. Gen Z grew up with technology and social media.⁶ In many ways, using legal research databases comes as second nature to its members. Students equate the search bar to Google (even though we know it’s not the same), and they know how to use filters the same way they shop for shoes on Amazon. Members of Gen Z are comfortable using technology and willing to learn new skills, but it is also important to recognize that this experience does not translate

¹ Members of Generation Z, a group identifier commonly shortened to “Gen Z,” were born between 1997–2012. Michael Dimock, *Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (Jan. 17, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins>.

² See generally Joan Catherine Bohl, *Generations X and Y in Law School: Practical Strategies for Teaching the “MTV/Google” Generation*, 54 LOY. L. REV. 775 (2008).

³ Gen Z students are comfortable with technology and independent learning. They appreciate structure and stability, but also desire flexibility and authenticity. Samantha McLaren, *6 Gen Z Traits You Need to Know to Attract, Hire, and Retain Them*, LINKEDIN (Oct. 8, 2019), <https://www.linkedin.com/business/talent/blog/talent-acquisition/how-to-hire-and-retain-generation-z>.

⁴ Shailini Jandial George, *Teaching the Smartphone Generation: How Cognitive Science Can Improve Learning in Law School*, 66 ME. L. REV. 163, 169 (2013).

⁵ McLaren, *supra* note 3.

⁶ Brian Mastroianni, *How Generation Z Is Changing the Tech World*, CBS NEWS (Mar. 10, 2016), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/social-media-fuels-a-change-in-generations-with-the-rise-of-gen-z>.

“Gen Z students are often focused on the results, not the process.”

into technological fluency.⁷ Do not expect Gen Z students to be masters of all technology; most students still struggle to create a table of contents in a Word document. These students will generally be quick learners, but it is crucial to be aware that they are not proficient from the beginning simply because they were raised on tablets and smartphones.⁸

There are also different platforms that can be used to supplement the databases we are helping them navigate. For example, I made a point to use Mentimeter, a popular software that allows speakers to display a presentation and receive responses to questions and polls in real time.⁹ I used this software not only to help teach legal research concepts but also to allow students to provide feedback and ask questions with anonymity. Gen Z users are accustomed to online public forums that allow the safety and comfort of asking questions without being identified.¹⁰ Mentimeter allows them to ask questions and state concerns without the professor or other students being aware of their identity, which encourages them to address any issues they have without fear of judgment.

I also made a point to use technology in a way that allowed me to connect with my students. Rather than the traditional style of going around the room on the first day of class asking students to introduce themselves, I created a discussion board thread that allowed them to do so online. Aside from relieving students of the nerve-wracking experience of coming up with a “fun fact” on the spot, students were more than happy to post pictures

of their pets and share their backgrounds. I plan to use this method of introduction in the future, because it allows me to get to know my students in a casual, online setting with no pressure or rush. Law school is stressful, and there is no harm in alleviating some of that anxiety by stepping back and finding ways to help students be more comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions (and yes, I refused to cold-call my students).

Rule #3: Stop trying to put Gen Z in a box.

It's easy to generalize generations. Regardless of whether you are trying to relate to students or criticize their generation, these comments are uninvited and often do more harm than good. The two most common behaviors I see are (1) trying too hard to relate to Gen Z and (2) criticizing Gen Z for characteristics unique to that generation. As to the first point, a common offense is including decade-old memes and expecting students to laugh (looking at you, “Brace yourself: exams are coming” Game of Thrones memes). These comments are often out of sync with who the members of Gen Z are, because they do not keep up with trends and generational shifts.¹¹ There is no need to try so hard to fit in and appeal to students, especially when your cultural references are more appropriate for our millennial predecessors. Members of Gen Z appreciate humor and creativity, but value authenticity above all else.¹²

Additionally, completely discounting Gen Z's intelligence and capabilities is also not the right way to go about things. In my own experience, I have had a member of Generation X ask me if I knew what a looseleaf was and if I had ever seen one (I have). Similarly, it is harmful when members of other generations use phrases like “kids these days.” We are talking about students at a graduate institution who are developing a professional identity—even if that professional

“Members of Gen Z appreciate humor and creativity, but value authenticity above all else.”

⁷ Shena Williams, *Generation Z: Computer Experts or Not?*, WOLTERS KLUWER (Aug. 31, 2020), <https://www.wolterskluwer.com/en/expert-insights/gen-z-computer-experts-or-not>.

⁸ *The Smartphone Generation Needs Computer Help*, ATLANTIC RETHINK, <https://www.theatlantic.com/sponsored/grow-google-2019/smartphone-generation-computer-help/3127/> (last visited Apr. 3, 2022).

⁹ On its face, Mentimeter is much like Microsoft PowerPoint because it allows you to create a presentation for class. However, Mentimeter allows you to embed polls in the presentation and generates a unique code for participants to join remotely. There are a variety of poll structures to select from, helping you to create an engaging and interactive presentation. You also have the ability to export data from a presentation for review. For more information, please see <https://www.mentimeter.com/features>.

¹⁰ Charlotte Alter, *Oversharing Victims Rebel: The Quest for Online Anonymity*, TIME (Jan. 17, 2014), <https://time.com/1150/oversharing-backlash-gen-zs-quest-for-online-anonymity/>.

¹¹ *The Whys and Hows of Generations Research*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (Sept. 3, 2015), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2015/09/03/the-whys-and-hows-of-generations-research/#:~:text=The%20Whys%20and%20Hows%20of%20Generations%20Research%20At,common%20predictors%20of%20differences%20in%20attitudes%20and%20behaviors>.

¹² McLaren, *supra* note 3.

“Little acts of kindness go a long way, and my students have greatly appreciated these small gestures.”

identity looks different from what you are accustomed to. I have witnessed colleagues express frustration at the amount of clarification questions current law students ask with respect to legal research assignments. The practice of regularly using rubrics as an assessment tool was implemented in the 1990s and early 2000s,¹³ with Gen Z entering elementary school at the tail end of that movement. These students grew up with the structure and specificity found in rubrics, which suggests that creating detailed rubrics in law school courses would be an effective way to address this issue. While we understand that Gen Z is unlike other generations in many ways, these phrases and accusations do nothing to foster a safe and effective learning environment. An “us versus them” mentality has no place in the classroom, and I encourage my colleagues to be more mindful of that going forward. Every generation blames and shames the others before and after it,¹⁴ but our goal as educators should be to avoid these harmful remarks. Gen Z students in particular are especially affected by these criticisms, because they are so invested in individualism,¹⁵ which heightens the need for removing comments about generational stereotypes from the law school environment.

Rule #4: Be patient and supportive. Gen Z is beginning law school in a recovering post-pandemic society on the brink of a predicted recession. While the average GPA has continued to rise over the years,¹⁶ so have rates of mental illness.¹⁷ Many of these students were valedictorians in their hometowns, completing

dual enrollment courses while still in high school. They went on to college, excelling in their studies and earning 4.0 GPAs. When they come to law school, the reality sets in as students begin to realize that they are the same as almost all their peers. I know—I was one of them.

To say “law school is hard, move on” completely discounts the struggles and experiences of Gen Z. We already recognize that law school is no walk in the park; there is no need to remind us. In a profession with high suicide rates and a widespread substance abuse problem, we should be much more responsive to these issues. When I taught a class on administrative law research, I asked my students to send in pictures of something they believe is regulated. Out of fifteen responses, two photos were of alcohol, two of nicotine, and two of extra-strength Tylenol. I joked in class while displaying the pictures and threw in, “At this point, I have to ask: are you guys okay?” Although they were laughing, many said “no,” and I knew there was truth behind it. It is important to let students know that you are there for them, beyond just helping them understand how to conduct legal research or understand the law. I made a point to bring in snacks throughout the semester and even used treats as motivation for in-class competitions. I also went out of my way to stock up snacks in my office for my students to drop by and refuel on exam days. Little acts of kindness go a long way, and my students have greatly appreciated these small gestures.

Rule #5: Ask Gen Z students what they want.

I do not purport to be the spokesperson of my generation, but I feel it necessary to urge my colleagues from other generations to listen to what we have to say. Our upbringings, learning styles, and attitudes require legal research professors to modify how they approach the material and students. Legal research professors need to be comfortable giving students the power to choose how they learn. We may be young and inexperienced, but we know what learning methods will work best for us. My generation has been deeply influenced by pedagogical innovations surrounding digital technologies

13 Clara Nkhoma et. al., *The Role of Rubrics in Learning and Implementation of Authentic Assessment: A Literature Review*, INFORMING SCIENCE INSTITUTE 237 (2020).

14 Ted Sheinman, *The Psychology Behind Generational Conflict*, SMITHSONIAN MAG. (Jan. 2020), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/sicence-nature/psychology-behind-generation-gap-180973731/>.

15 Shaun Pichler et al., *DITTO for Gen Z: A Framework for Leveraging the Uniqueness of the New Generation*, 64 BUSINESS HORIZONS, Sept.–Oct. 2021, at 599, 601.

16 Elizabeth Redden, *The Grade Inflation-College Completion Connection*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (Nov. 9, 2021), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/11/09/research-links-rise-college-completion-grade-inflation>.

17 Sophie Bethune, *Gen Z More Likely to Report Mental Health Concerns*, AM. PSYCH. ASS’N (Jan. 2019), <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/01/gen-z>.

and changing teaching methods.¹⁸ The way we learn is not necessarily the way legal research professors have always taught, which should be regarded as a learning opportunity rather than an insurmountable miscommunication.

If you have been teaching a particular legal topic in the same manner for years, but this new generation of students “just isn’t getting it,” perhaps it is necessary to do some reflection about why that may be. While imparting information is important, it is even more critical to deliver that information in a way that can be received. Give Gen Z the benefit of the doubt. These students are trying to understand the concepts you are teaching them, even if you get frustrated and do not believe that is the case. Maybe it is time to rethink the message (but don’t shoot the messenger). Those of us teaching law students have a great deal of knowledge to pass on to our Gen Z students, but we also have so much to learn from them if we would only ask.

Final Thoughts

It has been an interesting experience standing at the front of the classroom, looking out at members of my own generation as my students. Although they were wearing masks, I recognized them as my own people—I saw myself in them. I have been able to connect with my students because I was just like them: an overachieving student, bulldozing through law school during a pandemic. I can relate to them on a much more personal level than my multigenerational colleagues. Despite the difficulties I faced as a first-time legal research professor, this was an incredibly rewarding experience. While I have no basis for comparison between teaching millennials versus teaching Gen Zers, I feel confident that I know what type of learning style the latter are comfortable with.

A common jab at members of Gen Z is to call them “snowflakes,” connotating fragility.¹⁹ I recognize that this is the general banter commonplace among generations, and Gen Z is not innocent in these exchanges. However, I still find myself asking: what’s so wrong with being a snowflake? Snowflakes are remarkably unique, evolving and traveling a path unlike any other—just like our students. I make this point not to be defensive but to emphasize how individualism has such a strong hold on Gen Z. Although we will continue teaching Gen Z students for a couple more decades, no two students will ever be exactly alike.

Similarly, their learning styles and backgrounds will continue to change. We must be able to adapt to these new students, rather than employ the same teaching methods that have been used in the past. I encourage my colleagues to open their minds and hearts to Gen Z. We have a lot of opinions, and we hope you will take the time to listen. As a member of Gen Z and a legal research professor, I will continue to empower my students to embrace their individuality through the legal research process. I hope that lesson will transfer into other aspects of their lives, allowing them to blossom as able and competent people.

“I encourage my colleagues to open their minds and hearts to Gen Z.”

¹⁸ See generally Amy Chasteen Miller & Brooklyn Mills, “If They Don’t Care, I Don’t Care”: Millennial and Generation Z Students and the Impact of Faculty Caring, 19 J. SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING & LEARNING, Oct. 2019, at 78; Deep Shah, *Evolving Pedagogy*, LINKEDIN (2020), <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/evolving-pedagogy-deep-shah/>.

¹⁹ Older generations use the term “snowflakes” to suggest that members of Gen Z are sensitive, entitled, and coddled. Bobby Duffy, *The Bunk of Generational Talk*, WALL STREET J. (Oct. 22, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-bunk-of-generational-talk-11634914564>.