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**Motivating Generation Z: A Study of the Unique Learning Styles of a Generation**

by

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A Thesis

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## Chapter 1: Schools and Motivation

Schools have long been a boat anchor for education. This is because schools need education to function where an education does not need school in the same way. The aims of K-12 school are vast and “becoming educated” is one of those aims despite being egregiously ill prepared to accomplish that task. John Dewey, well-known philosopher and educational guru, once said: “Education is not preparation for life, education is life itself” (Dewey). It is to this end that school comes woefully short. The process of becoming educated is embedded in everything each one of us does. It’s an endeavor that goes beyond the walls of a classroom.

The direction each individual takes their education is an intriguing discussion. As George Jung, renowned drug smuggler, once said upon release after a short stint in prison: “I went in with a Bachelor of marijuana, came out with a Doctorate of cocaine” (Jung). Becoming educated is a matter of curiosity and passion. It’s a matter of motivation. How one uses that curiosity and passion -- see the difference between John Dewey and George Jung -- opens up a whole different conversation about morality and ethics and is a topic for another time. These two examples, among countless others, do however, illustrate how and why schools come up woefully short. Some students come to school motivated to do well. Their motivation might come from their vision for their future, consequences from home based on performance in the classroom, or just a simple interest in a specific content area. Teaching a student who fits one of these categories doesn’t require a lot of research, investment in the teacher-student relationship, or which way to present the material that is best for them. In many cases, they’re going to come to class ready to learn. This is not to say that a teacher's efforts

aren't laudable, even heroic in some cases, because they are, but one's passion for an education must come from within. Lighting a fire for curiosity within the students is what makes teaching an art. Motivating unmotivated students is where the hard work of teaching resides. Understanding that not all students like all subjects in school, that they're behind in a certain subject, that they don't have future plans that require much schooling, and motivating them is the real work because k-12 classrooms are as full of those students as they are filled with students who want to do well. The best things time spent in school can instill are curiosity, passion, and an interest in things unknown. Upon a pursuit of learning driven by these qualities, and after a long time, a person might be regarded -- by others -- as educated. Passion and curiosity are the result of motivation and being "educated" is a byproduct of those results. An education is one of those beautiful things in life that can't be attained, it's always an ongoing quest. Instilling that passion and curiosity in today's students is the challenge presented to today's teachers. Given the distinct differences in the way this generation was raised and how they view the world, exploring what motivates them will pay dividends for their long-term success.

To this point, Generation Z, the current age group making up a majority of the k-12 education system, is a complex, multi-faceted generation for whom a thorough analysis cannot be addressed without volumes of material. To that end, I'd like to address this Generation through the lens presented by Dr. Darla Rothman who wrote the article: "A Tsunami of Learners called Generation Z". Analyzing this generation is fruitful in large part because they stand out from every generation before them in one unique way. They're Digital Natives. Generation Z is the first generation for whom the

internet has existed their whole lives. As a result, Dr. Rothman argues that neurologically, they're just different. They experience the world, process information, and learn differently. Two quotes that stand out from her article are: "The brains of Generation Z have become wired to sophisticated, complex visual imagery. As a result, the part of the brain responsible for visual ability is far more developed, making visual forms of learning more effective" and "Their lives have been tightly scheduled, monitored, and bubble-wrapped (protected)." These two quotes struck me and are the impetus for my research. The research questions I derived from these quotes are:

1. How has Dr. Rothman's description of Generation Z's upbringing -- "Their lives have been tightly scheduled, monitored, and bubble-wrapped (protected)" -- impacted their investment in classroom learning?
2. How can teachers integrate culturally relevant strategies to support the particular and emotional needs of Generation Z learners?

I will address these questions through the use of a literature review in chapter two, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) to frame a case study that I conducted in chapter three. In the case study I carried out many of the pedagogical strategies described in chapter two, then chapter four will discuss my findings and chapter five will provide any conclusions or assertions drawn from the findings.

### *Culturally Relevant Strategies*

There is a distinct disconnect between what happens in the classroom and the viewpoint of education Dewey presents. There is often a curriculum that leaves little room for imagination and experimentation stifling the passion and curiosity it takes to become intrinsically motivated. This stifling of passion and curiosity, along with the

uniqueness of Generation Z is why the current system is restrictive, and it's the gap where I place my research. First, it's restrictive because it is not scaffolded. Second, there is a gap because there is a misguided mindset – and I've experienced this because I'm immersed in it as a high school English teacher – that says: "Well the kids are tech savvy, they'll figure it out". They're not. They're tech dependent, if anything. Nevertheless, anything tech-driven needs to be scaffolded just like any new concept being taught.

One of my favorite ways to change a behavior in the classroom is to do that behavior myself. For example, I'll overuse a slang term that they use. It turns them off to that behavior quite quickly. The same is true with technology. Putting an educational program that has a mobile app in front of them and expecting them to gravitate to it simply because it's mobile is a futile endeavor. It just invades their space. Generation Z needs to understand the "how" and the "why" for technology to be effective. Consequently, what begs to be explored is how to use technology to create an unrestrictive environment that piques the students' interest.

Another way the classroom is restrictive is that coincidentally, and unfortunately, right in the heart of the birth years of generation Z, 2002, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted. NCLB has since been replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, but NCLB drove curriculum during the formative years of Gen Zers. The main criticisms of NCLB, according to an article posted on Edweek.org are that the Act placed too much emphasis on testing and thus has a profound effect on curriculum. Students spent too much time on tested subjects like reading and math while losing out on foreign languages, Social studies and the Arts (Klein).

Another reason the current system is restrictive is the teachers, but it's not their fault. The generational shift in learning and technology intersects with teachers who are not as well-versed in the changes presented in Generation Z. So many teachers are willing to learn and recognize that students change, generations change. They have dedicated their lives to students, so they know the age well. That said, there are things that teachers can do to meet the needs of the generation. Esther Care, Helyn Kim and Claire Scoular wrote an article titled "21st Century Skills in 20th Century Classrooms" for the Brookings Institution. A valuable piece of information arose from their article. It had to do with teaching across content. They wrote: "teachers would benefit from collaborating with teachers from other subjects, not just in their teaching of the skills but in their observations and assessment of them. Sharing collected and recorded evidence, and justification of the interpretation of that evidence, will provide teachers with guidance concerning whether the students are developing skills as envisaged in revised curricula" (Care et al).

While this is not a cure-all for understanding the generation, it is a way to make meaning for the students in a way that wasn't as widely used in the past. It's also a way to engage students as they make-meaning across the curriculum. Per Rothman's description of Gen Z:

Some research has shown that the brains of Generation Z (Digital Natives) are structurally different than those of earlier generations. This has nothing to do with genetics and everything to do with how we use our brains to respond to things in our environment. . . Interactive games, collaborative projects, advance organizers, challenges, and anything that they can try and see are appreciated



(Rothman 2).

Collaborative projects are such an important piece. The world they not only live in now, but the one they engage with when they graduate will be one of teams and collaboration. Cross-curriculum projects are a great way to see how their world fits together. As 1:1 school models grow, it's important for teachers to use the access the internet offers as a way to engage and motivate.

The quote above gives great insight into what can be done differently for this generation of students. The pressure on teachers is not to be the "sage on the stage" as they once were. There is an element of that which is necessary, but exploration might have a lot more value to students with the tools they have at their fingertips now. Tangible differences that can be made in the classroom change the focus from Direct-instruction with a small amount of student-led classwork to student-led classwork with a small amount of direct-instruction.

One stand-out aspect of the study found that when technology is the tool for direct instruction, feedback happens more readily and maybe even just leveraging that is an important step to meeting Gen Z where they are.

Later in this research, it will be clear in the case study I conducted that this direct-instruction is a welcomed element of education and engagement despite Dr. Rothman's hypothesis that "Interactive games, collaborative projects, advance organizers, challenges, and anything that they can try and see are appreciated" (Rothman 2). YPAR allowed the student to provide me with more feedback on what worked for him within each pedagogical choice. Reflection sheets after each assignment put the students in

the driver's seat and highlighted what worked about each pedagogical choice and what didn't.

## Chapter 2: Gen Z and the Culture of Education

Generation Z, also commonly known as “Digital Natives” or “iGen” refers to young adults born roughly between 1995 and 2010 (Rothman 1). They range in age from 11 to 25 years old. This places them anywhere from 5th graders, to employees getting established in their careers, to business owners, to congressmen -- see Madison Cawthorn. They have only known the world with the internet. These are the students entering college and the workforce full of new ideas to pair with the optimism and youthful exuberance to make it happen. What makes Generation Z stand out is that they are the first generation to have grown up with the internet. It has been ubiquitous their whole lives. The research around this new generation suggests that this uniqueness has materially changed their lives. The internet’s existence has changed their pre-school learning, how they spend their downtime, how they gather information, and how they work.

While older generations have adapted to a world with the internet as well, it’s important to note that the internet changed how these older generations raised their Gen Z children, too. Dr. Darla Rothman, who is currently a Curriculum Developer & Program Coordinator at Maryland Police and Correctional Training Commissions had this to say of Generation Z in her article titled “A Tsunami of Learners called Generation Z”: “Their lives have been tightly scheduled, monitored, and bubble–wrapped (protected)” (Rothman). There are many reasons for this, many were negatively impacted by the Great Recession, many of these parents were the same age Jacob Wetterling was when he was abducted so their own parents tightened the reins on free-play, and many watched the events of 9/11 unfold right in front of their eyes.

Due to this connectivity, and these experiences, they perceive the world differently than every generation before them. Pair that with how tightly monitored they are and there is a lot to analyze about them. To narrow the focus and look only at what applies to my study, I will look at what is being said about the pervasiveness and effect of social media in this generation, how teachers can shift their strategies to use the technology, using tech to motivate this generation, and how Generation Z learning styles match with the ubiquity of the technology.

Jonathan Haidt's work -- he wrote *The Coddling of the American Mind* -- is a wonderful place to begin this literature review because he so succinctly describes the pervasiveness and the problems that lie within social media. In January of 2019 he gave an interview on the Joe Rogan Experience podcast. In that interview, he discussed social media and said that by 2010 about half of American teenagers have a smartphone and access to social media ("Jonathan Haidt: Raising Anti-Fragile Kids - Joe Rogan"). In 2010, the oldest Gen Zers were 15 years old. It's a safe assumption that, at this time, many pre-adolescent children had this technology as well. Further, he makes a compelling argument that as a result of this access, self-harm and mental health disorders are on a precipitous rise.

These claims are supported by research. One such study was conducted by Elroy Boers, Mohammad H Afzali, Nicola Newton, and Patricia Conrad. It was published in *JAMA Pediatrics* and titled "Association of screen time and Depression in Adolescence". One of their key findings was a strong correlation between social media use and depression. They suppose: "A significant between-person association indicated that a 1-hour increase in social media use was associated with a 0.64-unit (on a scale

from 0 to 28) increase in the severity of depression symptoms over 4 years” (Boers, et. al. 1). Haidt’s claims were further substantiated by Jean Twenge and her research.

Twenge wrote an article for *The Atlantic* titled “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation” where she notes: “Around 2012, I noticed abrupt shifts in teen behaviors and emotional states.” What is significant about 2012? Twenge realized, “It was exactly the moment when the proportion of Americans who owned a smartphone surpassed 50 percent.” Accounting for this, Twenge cited a survey by the National Institute on Drug Abuse called Monitoring the Future. This survey asks 1,000 questions of 9th, 10th, and 12 graders each year. The survey asked teens how happy they were and how much time they spent doing various activities including screen and non-screen activities. The results were astounding. Without exception, teens who spent more time on screen than the average were less happy. Without exception (Twenge).

Discussions around Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and Bloom’s Taxonomy are common in education circles and matter now as much as they ever did. Given Twenge’s findings and the impact teachers have, if only on the basis of time spent with students, there is some level of responsibility on the teachers to prepare students for learning. The foundational levels of Maslow’s Hierarchy are physiological needs and safety needs. If students are not comfortable with those elements of their lives, they can’t be expected to be motivated to learn. While I suspect a strong family structure, among other things, builds resilience here, that research deviates from my argument. Given the time spent at school, teachers should feel some level of responsibility to prepare students to learn. Proper framing of the material goes a long way toward this preparedness. So, As distractions abound and the forces of social media and dopamine

work against them, what needs to happen in the classroom to motivate students? The Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition Model (SAMR) provides a framework for this eloquently explained by Danae Romrell, Lisa C. Kidder, and Emma Wood “Dr. Ruben R Puentdura developed the SAMR model in 2006 as part of his work with the Maine Learning Technologies Initiative (Puentedura, 2006). The model was intended to encourage educators to significantly enhance the quality of education provided via technology in the state of Maine” (Romrell et al. 4). SAMR is an acronym that stands for Substitution, Augmentation, Modification and Redefinition. This model highlights a new way to think about the use of technology in the classroom. Romrell, Kidder, and Wood break it down this way:

“• Substitution: The technology provides a substitute for other learning activities without functional change.

• Augmentation: The technology provides a substitute for other learning activities but with functional improvements.

• Modification: The technology allows the learning activity to be redesigned. •

Redefinition: The technology allows for the creation of tasks that could not have been done without the use of the technology” (Romrell, Kidder and Wood).

This is a widely used model that helps frame the use of devices in the classroom. The challenge for teachers is to move away from Substitution and toward Redefinition. Rather than simply reading *Romeo and Juliet* in print, Substitution says that you read the text online, but a Redefinition approach says that you might give the characters social media accounts and have students post as the characters might, which shows an

understanding, and challenges the students by asking them to bring the story and concepts into the 21st century.

Dave Doucette provides more examples and ties the idea of redefinition, without labeling it as such, to Generation Z's needs quite eloquently in his article titled "Meeting the educational demands of Generation Z" written for Edtechmagazine.com when he writes that: "Letting students create their own videos or programs is an engaging way to help iGens understand, from the ground up, what authentic digital content looks like" (Doucette). He notes that everything in their lives is personalized from their content streaming preferences to their food choices. " These attitudes will inevitably influence education, and institutions are starting to adapt" he writes.

With the pervasiveness of technology comes a shift for teachers as well. They are simply not the expert in the room anymore. Shifting our focus to facilitating the learning process rather than imparting knowledge will be necessary. Doucette writes: "For educators, teaching information literacy — the ability to determine when information is credible — is a good first step toward developing responsible digital citizens" (Doucette). The use of the SAMR model, if done well, can challenge students to not only manipulate the technology in ways they haven't before, but can also bring the ideas and concepts learned in school into the 21st century, personalize those ideas and give them more meaning to the students as well.

It goes beyond adapting to students' needs. The shift in teaching strategy prepares them for their future. Doucette cites work from New media Consortiums Horizon Project which states: ". . . the World Economic Forum (WEF) predicts that by 2020, **35%** of the skills considered vital for workplace success will have changed"

(Doucette). Teachers are tasked with preparing students for job skills that may not even exist yet, but we know that technology isn't going away. Being able to move with it will be paramount to a student's success.

There are, of course, elements of human-ness that never change despite the environment around them. Passion and curiosity are two examples. These intangible attributes exist within humans in spite of our environment. To what degree these attributes, among others, exist is specific to each individual. Kate Borowske, author of the article "Curiosity and Motivation-To-Learn", in not as many words, agrees. Consider a multiple choice test where the answer is right in front of the student. It's tangible, yet what Borowske identifies, through other authors, as paramount to the curiosity are: Novelty, Complexity, Uncertainty, and Conflict (Borowske). All of these are intangible phenomena that pique our curiosity, yet so often in the classroom and per the common educational model, students are offered the equivalent of a multiple choice test. Expiration, choice and agency are often lacking.

This matters. It matters because curiosity translates to motivation. Borowske explains how each of these phenomena work through an example. That example is an Ice Age Exhibit at a museum. Of this example she writes: Visitors were broken into 4 categories based on their previous knowledge and/or experience with the exhibit. The exhibit designer then had to consider how to set up the exhibit to keep each of the types of visitors interested. Here were Borowske's findings:

The designers had to

- Create tasks that capitalize on novelty, complexity, ambiguity, variety, and surprise



- Purposely place individuals in contexts that are discrepant with their experience, skills, and personality
- Allow opportunities to play
- Create challenges that match or slightly exceed current skills
- Provide choices and participation in decision making process
- Give clear information about task structure and expectations
- Emphasize the meaningfulness of activity and efforts
- Express empathy for individuals' emotions, values, and needs
- Express and model interest in individuals and activities

In short, she found:

In teaching, you must simply work your pupil into such a state of interest in what you are going to teach him that every other object of attention is banished from his mind; then reveal it to him so impressively that he will remember the occasion to his dying day; and finally fill him with devouring curiosity to know what the next steps in connection with his subject are (Borowske)

The challenge for educators, of course, is to create these scenarios in the classroom, for it is in these moments that curiosity translates to motivation and a teacher has conquered the ultimate obstacle of the profession. Specificity and real-world application matter, so it's worthwhile to analyze what this looks like in the current generation in the K-12 education system, Generation Z.

My teaching career began in 2013, and ever since then I have seen not only a change in students, but have been a part of many meetings where the topic of what to do with kids and their cell phones is a top agenda item. Some of the ideas presented,

and strategies attempted, by teachers and administration allow students to continue their phone usage; however, some strategies have been profound. Some integrate device usage into the learning process. This is a number that is growing. In a survey by the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) found that, in 2018, 40 percent of districts in the United States employed 1:1 device usage in the classroom. This is up from 23 percent in 2014 (Cavanagh). This CoSN survey sheds light on a movement that was preceded by the grassroots Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) move toward mobile learning. In an article written in 2016 by Karen J Mclean for *Frontiers in Psychology*. BYOD is discussed as an option for schools because it was cost effective and “. . . mobile phones and mobile tablet technologies have potential to support collaborative learning in conventional and online learning environments” (Mclean, “The Implementation of Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) in Primary [Elementary] Schools”). This BYOD model evolved into the 1:1 model we see rapidly growing across the country.

The goal of this research is to expand on those practices by addressing why tech dependency is pervasive, how this has changed the neurological makeup of Generation Z, and how the educational world needs to pivot as a result of these phenomena.

The advent and advancement of the internet has created a generation that is rarely content with what they have. The seminal research on this generation comes from Marc Prensky who wrote “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants” in 2001. While the numbers have changed -- dramatically, in some cases -- in the 20 years since he wrote the article, the ideas he presents and his perspective are quite astute:

Today's students – K through college – represent the first generations to grow up with this new technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, video games, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age (Prensky 1).

This phenomenon has had a profound effect on Generation Z. For them, the internet is as present as televisions or telephones were for their parents. Since this article was published, there has been more research that speaks to technology's effect on attention spans as well as the effect of screen time on the development of adolescents. It's only natural that the pervasiveness of this technology would find its way into the classroom in many forms both positive and negative. Generation Z gives only a short amount of time for material to gain their attention, "With online text, learners now spend about eight seconds picking hyperlinked keywords to find answers instead of reading the whole text, which calculates to 4.4 seconds per 100 words of text. Instructors teaching in 2020 must be prepared to teach using software, hardware, and digital, technological and social media" (Rothman).

In David and Jonah Stillman's book *Gen Z @Work*, Jonah, who is David's teenage son, writes that Generation Z's attention span is just 8 seconds (Stillman and Stillman 13). This is down from Millennial's lengthy 12 second attention span.

All of this is to say that it's no wonder the Education world would be affected by these shifts. It's time for instructors to change their approach to incorporate not just the technology, though that is a component, but also our knowledge of the needs of Generation Z. Arlene Nicholas said it best: "Technology is not a tool to them; it is an ordinary way of life" (Nicholas 3). The technology is already entrenched. These students

are over the novelty of it. It's an expectation. We need to look at how to take advantage of their worldviews and personalities within this reality. Nicholas cites a survey from Pew Research about methods of learning and the results are striking. A reflection on the "tradition teaching models" might include lecture and periodic quizzing, and yet, as shouldn't surprise us, these practices did not garner much admiration. They were cast aside in favor of practices such as YouTube video lessons and even a variety of practices that might include lecture, but amongst other approaches. To that end, constant input and reflections from students are necessary skills for the 21st century instructor. Having a clear understanding of what is working and what isn't is necessary to keep engagement high. Another way to think about this is to consider that, because connectivity is ubiquitous and because they see the world differently, they approach problems differently.

As stated earlier, the Gen Z brain is wired differently as a result of the "connectedness" that they have to information and to each other. Much of what happens on a mobile device is linked to instant gratification, and feedback that is not present in a traditional classroom. The transition to real-world meaning making from the classrooms is not an easy leap and as a result, boredom can set in easily. As a result, I'll be interested to explore in this study how classroom management factors in motivating the students. Teaching has always been a balance of management and pedagogy. You cannot get to the pedagogy without the management, so they are both necessary. That said, the escape that mobile devices offer changes classroom management dramatically. This is why Ben Gose's point in his article "Gen Z Changes the Debate About Devices in the Classroom" stuck with me. He wrote: "All too often bans are more

about classroom management rather than a pedagogical decision" (Gose). Many of the examples he uses won't apply to my research participants. For example, he writes that device bans in a classroom with 35 year-old parents who need to get in touch with babysitters and track bus schedules are actually demeaning; which is likely true. I do believe, though, that the premise still stands. We're in a world where Target employees, when asked where an item is, pull out their own phones to help guests search. These devices are extensions of us. Why take that away from them? Teaching timely and effective use practices are much more valuable. Management looks different at the high school level. The power differential in a high school between instructor and student looks much different than the one Gose presents. However, with Gen Z and devices, discussing proper usage and maintaining expectations looks similar to the scenario Gose presents. High schoolers might slip more, but the idea is the same. High school teachers need to expect that students use their devices properly and provide some grace.

The expectation is clear in my classroom, and context is important here - our district has given every student a Chromebook to keep for the year. We are not a Bring Your Own Device school. This is to say that mobile devices are not necessary for educational purposes. The Chromebook does everything the students need. My expectation is that mobile devices need to be an accessory to your day, not the focal point. If the majority of the class period is spent on a device, that device has become the focal point and a problem. I know that students use their devices for music and conversation, it's the way of the world and that's fine, but my clear and oft repeated

expectation provides a framework that prioritizes schoolwork while honoring their interests in connectedness

The pervasiveness of the mobile device, as I have laid out, has demonstrably changed Generation Z. As Rothman states:

“The brains of Generation Zs have become wired to sophisticated, complex visual imagery. As a result, the part of the brain responsible for visual ability is far more developed, making visual forms of learning more effective. Auditory learning (lecture and discussion) is very strongly disliked by this age group. Interactive games, collaborative projects, advance organizers, challenges, and anything that they can try and see are appreciated” (Rothman 2).

In her article “Preferred Learning Methods of Generation Z” Dr. Arlene Nicholas expressed what technology is to this generation in a way that I had not considered before. She notes that: “Technology is not a tool to them; it is an ordinary way of life”(Nicholas 3) and “These digital natives have immediate access to answers and expect rapid response times. Perhaps it is less about the process of learning than the quick acquisition of any needed information” (Nicholas 4). These factors, Nicholas says, might contribute to their shorter attention span, but I might surmise as well that these factors are the impetus for teachers to shift their methods. While Nicholas gives us the extrinsic “why” here, as in why Generation Zers are the way they are, Dr. Rothman and Dr. Seemiller give us the “how” - Rothman, as stated earlier suggested that advanced organizers, interactive games and group projects were ways to engage, while Dr. Seemiller gives us the intrinsic “how” In her TEDxDayton presentation: “. . . Like volunteerism, the cure for their disengagement is not simply trying to re-engage them in

a system that doesn't seem to work for them. . . What's interesting is that, not only are they disrupting these systems, at the same time they're working right around them and finding other ways to make a difference" (Seemiller).

Nicholas agrees in the "Conclusions" section of her article where she writes. "New technology platforms may be required as well as faculty development to learn methods for teaching Gen Z that includes more than technical approaches" (Nicholas 10).

One attempt I have made that is evident in my study and has continued to develop particularly through the COVID "distance learning" time period is to invest time understanding iMovie. Making my lessons into "movies" meets not only Rothman's supposition that Gen Z are visual learners, but also meets Nicholas' point about rapid response times. If I organize my lessons and my movies in such a way that provides that feedback, I have noticed that students gravitate to those assignments.

Technology is always changing; companies in the tech space are always looking to develop the next "big thing" and the internet has provided opportunities that generations before were not afforded. This idea can be made clear with a few different examples. Consider, for example, the streaming service iHeartRadio. iHeartRadio allows me, in Minneapolis, to listen to a talk show in, say, Orlando -- or anywhere in the country for that matter. Contrast this with previous generations where technological advances include the change from AM to FM radio, or the move from cassettes to eight-tracks to compact discs, and even mp3 players. Not a single one of these advancements demonstrably changed the way they consumed content the way that iHeartRadio has for this generation. iHeartRadio revolutionized the radio industry.

Video rentals have gone through a similar change. Forget the simple transition from VCRs to Blu-ray players, a more telling example is that Blockbuster, the movie rental giant of the 1990's, had an opportunity to purchase Netflix:

In 2000, Reed Hastings, the founder of a fledgling company called Netflix, flew to Dallas to propose a partnership to Blockbuster CEO John Antioco and his team. The idea was that Netflix would run Blockbuster's brand online and Antioco's firm would promote Netflix in its stores. Hastings got laughed out of the room. We all know what happened next. Blockbuster went bankrupt in 2010 and Netflix is now a \$28 billion dollar company, about ten times what Blockbuster was worth.

(Satell)

Students, and adults alike, are used to advancements and changes, permanence is no matter to us as a society. This is clear in our willingness to purchase the latest and greatest device despite the cost.

It was only a matter of time before we saw this innovation and change enter our classrooms. The internet has become the language of business, commerce, and social interaction. Naturally, it was going to invade the world of education. Technology has been an welcomed innovation to the classroom, but it is not without its struggles. Many studies, including both "Curbing Digital Distractions in the Classroom" by Corey Seemiller and "Gen Z and Digital Distractions in the Classroom: Student Classroom Use of Digital Devices for Non-Class Related Purposes" by Bernard R. McCoy cite information stating that many students defer to their phone during class to avoid boredom. This "avoiding boredom" is reason, in part, for instructors to adjust their practice (McCoy). We do, however, know that for a lesson to be enriching, both parties



need to be invested. The growing prevalence of mobile smart devices in the classroom has taken the student's attention away from the current model of the learning process.

Another component of motivation that needs to be accounted for, and one that Gen Zers had no control over, for it was just thrust upon them, is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act -- now the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This program was enacted into law in 2001 -- right as many Gen Zers were entering school. With this new emphasis on standardized tests, there has been less emphasis on arts and creativity Nicholas writes. She goes on to say, "Gen Z students want to have exact directions guiding their work and were least interested in creative assignments" (Nicholas "Preferred Learning Methods of Generation Z"). This emphasis of standardized testing has lessened Phy Ed, recess, and many other elective courses that help to develop that part of the brain and learning process.

NCLB is one aspect of how Generation Z was brought up differently. It's a fundamental difference in their schooling experience than that of their parents. Another aspect begins when they are much younger.

Because Generation Z has had smartphones in their hands since before they could walk, they are predominantly visual learners. Their brains have actually developed differently. (Rothman 2) This is why, next to actual teachers, surveys have shown that the best teaching tool is YouTube.

I would be remiss, here, not to explore direct-instruction. Direct-instruction is a time tested, time-honored model that has fallen out of favor as synchronicity has grown. However, as I synthesize what teaching is and what it can be, it would seem direct-instruction has a place. As an Alternative teacher, Kevin Butler's article, "The Value of

Direct-Instruction for At-Risk Students” for the Journal of Education and Development struck me. His article was published on May 15th, 2020. This date is note-worthy because common practice has shifted away from direct-instruction toward and toward “constructivist teaching methods”, as he terms them, in recent years. He cites work by Carnine, Duffett, Krahenbuhl, and Stone to support this assertion. He, though, makes the case for direct-instruction. The key take away from his argument is this, “Ultimately, the teacher should take as much responsibility as possible for students’ learning, and therefore, he should actively present material, guide students through it, and give them necessary time for supervised, independent practice” (Butler 1). The roles of a teacher are myriad. Being someone students can trust and respect is paramount to even beginning the teaching process. Teachers also have to know when to push and when to pull back. All of this needs to be done while remaining the clear authority in the classroom. As the clear authority, teachers not only are the final word regarding disputes, conversation direction, and management issues, but they’re also the authority on content.

Content knowledge matters, obviously, but only once the students care what you have to say. When teachers take the responsibility for student learning, the students know it because evidence of caring is clear in more ways than simply pushing for academic excellence. Taking responsibility does not necessarily equate to being a direct-instructor where a minimally-guided instructor isn’t taking responsibility. This is where Evelyn Kroesbergen, Johannes E. H. Van Luit and Cora J.M. Maas validate Butler’s stances. Their 2004 article titled “Effectiveness of Explicit and Constructivist Mathematics Instruction for Low-Achieving Students in the Netherlands” written for the

*Elementary School Journal* looks specifically at explicit vs constructivist instruction. The question that they centered their study around had to do specifically with “whether low-achieving mathematics students benefit more from instruction that requires them to contribute actively to lessons and to construct their own mathematical knowledge under the guidance of a teacher (constructivist instruction) or from instruction that is clearly structured and presented by the teacher (explicit instruction)” (Kroesbergen et al. 235). The authors presented 3 hypotheses at the beginning of the study. The second hypothesis was “Students who receive constructivist instruction will improve more in problem solving and (2b) will use more varied and efficient problem-solving strategies than students receiving explicit instruction”(Kroesbergen et al. 235). Their findings were interesting.

Upon conducting the study, they found that while students were quite successful in the constructivist learning model, they were more successful in the explicit learning model with regard to that particular hypothesis. One explanation, they write, is this: “students in this condition experienced both correct and incorrect solutions, which could produce confusion for low achievers (Jones et al., 1997). In the EI [Explicit instruction] condition, only correct solutions were presented and little confusion could therefore arise.” It is for this reason that I offer a more direct-instruction based assignment. I want to see how students do after they know what success looks like. Admittedly, in a perfect world, there is a weaning process. Students first though, in many cases, need to know what to look for, how to think about an assignment, analyze the scope of the expectations, and develop a plan to accomplish the task. Haphazard, inconsequential task completion only leads to a feeling of emptiness and motivation wanes.

Responsibility can be present in both models. However, one has to know what the students need then tailor the instruction. This is where Butler ties his argument up neatly and where my field research squares with his approach. He writes: “direct instruction is especially helpful for students of color and low-income students, and minimally-guided instruction tends to widen the achievement gap” (Butler 13). And,

. . .once a person has a significant quantity of background knowledge in a subject, minimally-guided instruction may be useful as a way for the person to apply his knowledge; for example, if students have been taught in detail the steps for writing a good essay, it could be valuable to allow them to write an essay about whatever topic they would like. This allows them to explore and discover new ideas; however, they are discovering these ideas by implementing knowledge (the steps for writing an essay) that has been taught directly (Butler 13)

I chose to offer a teacher-led direct-instruction assignment as part of my field research because, after four years teaching at-risk students, I have a pretty good sense for what they need. Often what leads to students enrolling at an alternative center -- a school full of at-risk students -- is that the classroom material passed them by for one reason or another. They need to be taught how to learn. Background knowledge is so important. Setting them free on an assignment without any instruction, while they think they like that freedom, leaves them twisting in the wind, and has proven to be a detriment in the past.

The addition of technology, while it can change the dynamic of learning in the classroom, does not have to mean instructors forgo direct instruction, but it does mean that we need to consider how we use that technology to the teacher's pedagogical and the students' intellectual advantage. The technology needs to be used in a way that engages and challenges the students. This space is likely the cross section of student motivation vs student boredom as well as community support.

All of this is to say that Generation Z is unique. They not only have unique challenges, but being Digital Natives places them in a unique circumstance that hasn't been seen before. Given this distinctiveness, it is worth exploring what teachers can do in their own classrooms with their practices to meet the needs of and motivate these students. This upbringing has affected their learning. How has this nurturing affected their capacity to take risks, be vulnerable, and be independent? Additionally, how can instructors adapt their strategies to meet the needs of these students and what steps need to be taken to engage the students effectively?

For these reasons, as Gen Z progresses toward high school and college. An examination of the effectiveness of the current schooling model, paired with how it can be improved is necessary. Unfortunately, a cursory look at the education system suggests that education systems have not changed and adapted with the advancements of technology.

Technological devices, accessibility, and production have changed how all of us live and work in our society. Many of us over the age of 25 had to learn the new ways technology changes the process of our old ways. This is not the case for Generation Z. Many of the devices and processes that Millennials and older have had to learn and or

see as tools are not simply a novelty for Generation Z. Instead they are part of the fabric of their lives. An expectation. A Necessity. It's only natural that the education world would be affected. The societal shifts that occurred leading up to and through Generation Z's upbringing -- Namely the growing pervasiveness and reliance on the internet -- have materially changed not only how Generation Z sees the world, but also how they learn. That said, Corey Seemiller and Megan Grace note in their article "Generation Z: Educating and Engaging the Next Generation of Students" written for the *American College Personnel Association and Wiley Periodicals Inc.* in 2017, that "Current campus environments have been designed for previous generations, which do not and cannot fully meet the needs, interests, and learning preferences of Generation Z students" (Seemiller and Grace 21). They also cite a student who stated that Generation Z needs, ". . . to be actively doing the learning to obtain the most information" (Seemiller and Grace 22). A bird's eye view of the education world supports this statement about campus' not being prepared to support the needs, interests etc. of Generation Z, as Millennials and older often sat in rooms with blank walls and discussed with peers or absorbed lectures from professors. One might infer that the quotes gathered by Seemiller and Grace suggest that generation Z's preferred learning style is Kinesthetic, followed by Visual and lastly, Auditory. A move toward Alternative seating and other strategies that try to address their more kinesthetic learning style and shortened attention span prove that experts were already aware of this hierarchy of preferred learning styles.

Teachers and researchers know this and Dr. Rothman verifies it in her article "A Tsunami of Learners Called Generation Z" when she writes, "They are kinesthetic,

experiential, hands-on learners who prefer to learn by doing rather than being told what to do or by reading text. Learning is not a spectator sport” (Rothman 3). but ultimately, these attempts seem like bandages to a deeper issue. Being able to stand or rock while on a physio-ball does not necessarily equal engagement.

I position my research solidly in this space because I surmise that maturity plays a role that cannot be overlooked. There is a certain investment that comes with age, and this life experience.

When a student enters college and eventually takes classes within their chosen major, they're older, they are taking classes with like-minded individuals, and there is a likely financial pressure to do well so an interest in learning comes easier -- in many, not all, cases. These, while extrinsic motivators exist for older Gen Z students where younger Gen Zers cannot relate.

Not only can't Gen Zers in high school (and younger) relate to these motivators, they have a whole set of other factors to come to grips with. Life experience creates a different set of values, and without it, students in high school may struggle to see a bigger picture. In addition, due to the varied course requirements to receive a high school diploma, it is likely that a student has to endure course material that they don't like (unlike those in post-secondary major courses) and also work with various levels of interest among their classmates.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

This study is unique because it takes place in an alternative classroom. There is a peculiarity here that needs to be accounted for. There are certain traumas that lead students away from a mainstream school and to alternative programs and being sensitive to those, which are remarkably individualized, is imperative to the success of the program, the student and my relationship therein. There are various reasons students are eligible to enroll at our alternative program, some of these include: pregnancy, chemical abuse

This research will be conducted using the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) Methodology. “[Youth-led participatory action research] is a form of community based participatory research in which youth are trained to identify and analyze problems relevant to their lives.” (Ozer 3) This is exciting because, as members of Generation Z, my students want agency. The decision to use YPAR is intentional because no one knows Gen Z quite like someone immersed in the culture of those that make up the generation. This study collected data through the use of a variety of assignments and reflections after each. The assignments were designed with Gen Z’s various attributes in mind that make them unique. It’s the reflections, however, that help drive my research. These reflections were 1-page journal responses where the students wrote about what worked for them, what they would improve about the assignment parameters and what they took from the project.

Further, Ozer writes “Once young people generate, analyze, and interpret data, they engage and report to relevant stakeholders to advocate for solutions to the



problem” (Ozer 3). Because this is a study in what changes need to be made to address the uniqueness of Generation Z, I intend to leverage their input as much as possible.

The study will be conducted through a series of assignments using various instructional strategies including lecture, self-directed research projects, and a more structured blog-like assignment where the students responded to and collaborated with each other.

These assignments, followed by short reflections will make up the content of the study.

I’ll use the input from these student reflections to draw conclusions about my study. In theory, they would give input about what worked and what didn’t with each instructional format then I would be able to synthesize and present those findings.

The reflections were the key here because this is where YPAR is most effective. It is my hope that through the students’ reflections I’ll be able to offer resolutions

### **Students with the opportunity:**

The research was completed with a group of 11th and 12th grade English students in an Alternative setting. This makes them uniquely qualified to participate in this study. Their most basic qualification is their age. These students are firmly in the Gen Z age range, but more than that, Dr. Rothman supposes that for Gen Zers to engage they need, “Fast delivery of content with complex graphics. They are kinesthetic, experiential, hands-on learners who prefer to learn by doing rather than being told what to do or by reading text. Learning is not a spectator sport” (Rothman 3).

A large number of school-aged students struggle not only academically, but socially and emotionally as well. What separates our students is that they were lucky enough to be found. We’re able, because of our low enrollment and more personalized

approach, to not only help the students, but we learn what they need as a generation as well. While this quote by Dr. Rothman is likely true for many in that age range, our students have also suffered traumas that highlighted the need for an alternative, individualized delivery and in turn, instructors at our ALC are getting a crash course in what it means to connect with this generation. In a traditional English classroom, a novel unit might be set up to include character and vocabulary lists, chapter quizzes, nightly reading, study guides, and a final exam. Often, this does not include any film representation or allusions in pop culture. The lack of visual connections, or “complex graphics” as Rothman would say, hurries the lack of interest students feel. The traditional methods are tried and true, but a blend of their learning styles will connect with more students.

Students at an alternative center suffer below average reading skills at a higher rate so jumping right into existentialism in *The Great Gatsby* or Coming of Age in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, despite how perfectly those authors capture the concepts, fall on deaf ears if students struggle with reading comprehension in the first place. The nuance of the text is far from their minds if all their efforts are focused only on following plot events. This is where “complex graphics” help so much. To watch Baz Luhrmann give his interpretation of events in his 2013 rendition of *The Great Gatsby* is where the students start to pick up on some of that nuance. Only then, by going back and reading a section of text that they have just seen, can the students start to make sense of the greater commentary being offered by the author.

Understanding this about my students in particular is what makes them a great fit for my study. Their grasp of how to learn, and their ability to do so firmly entrenches them in Gen Z culture.

The timing of this study has been made more complex by the necessity of Distance Learning amid the COVID-19 Pandemic. Attendance has always been a concern for our school. It has affected productivity, graduation rates and learning gaps. It will surely be a hurdle for this study. Distance Learning only exacerbated this. The study participants were recruited from a group of my students; participation was open to all of my students. Those who even entertained the idea of joining the study were willing and committed. Before enrolling in the study, participants completed an Informed Consent form that signified their knowledge of expectations and willingness. Participants were allowed to unenroll at any time. The final number of participants was one as determined by willingness of the sample. As a result, this study was conducted in a case study fashion following John, an 11th grade student.

**Data Collection:**

This project was completed using Qualitative research as opposed to Quantitative research largely because it was conducted and presented in narrative form. The data I used was collected through answers to strategically placed questions within video lessons along with reflection sheets. Qualitative research is defined as “data describes qualities or characteristics. It is collected using questionnaires, interviews, or observation, and frequently appears in narrative form” (“Research Guides”). As versus

Quantitative, “. . . data are used when a researcher is trying to quantify a problem, or address the ‘what’ or ‘how many’ aspects of a research question” (“Research Guides”).

My research questions include:

- 1) Generation Z’s upbringing has been described this way: “Their lives have been tightly scheduled, monitored, and bubble–wrapped (protected)” (Rothman, “A Tsunami of learners called Generation Z”). How has this nurturing affected their capacity to take risks, be vulnerable, and be independent?
- 2) How can teachers integrate culturally relevant strategies to support the particular and emotional needs of Generation Z learners?

YPAR is an effective framework to address these issues because, with agency, it is my hope that students take risks, are vulnerable, and are independent. I am concerned about this with my research group because, as At-Risk Learners, their priorities are not always on school. A variety of factors stop them from “playing school” well. That said, Ozar makes an encouraging statement about finding community through YPAR:

With respect to its potential effects on settings, YPAR can strengthen Supportive and cooperative relationships among youth and with adults; provide opportunities for belonging and opportunities to build new skills in inquiry, communication, and group work; and support efficacy and making a difference.

My school has placed much importance on “community”. It was my hope that the natural pull that students felt as a result of those efforts toward building community would translate to increased attentiveness to their YPAR expectations. I sense, as well,

because they are the sharing generation that they may have been interested in what YPAR had to offer. I am aware, however, that distance learning may wreak havoc on the efficacy of my study. I will need to lay the groundwork early and earn the respect that they seek to hold their attention.

**Limitations:**

There were unforeseen limitations to the study which included the effects of the response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. These limitations manifested themselves not so much as a worry of getting sick, but because of distance learning. To address these concerns, I conducted a study that encompassed the different learning styles of the participants while keeping a close eye on Rothman's supposition that Generation Z students are visual and kinesthetic learners, at least more than auditory learners. The study was conducted in the first full year of the Covid pandemic, the 2020-2021 school year. The previous school year, on March 13th, our understanding and expectation of what school was turned upside down. We began the era of Distance Learning for the rest of that spring term, students and teachers worked hard to find their footing. Teacher mindsets emphasized giving grace and prioritizing mental health. The following school, the 2020 - 2021 year was shrouded by the unknown.

My students began the year in a Hybrid model. This meant that students who chose to come back to the school were split into two groups in efforts to maintain social distancing. Families also had the option to be "full distance" all year. This means that their student never came to school. Teachers had to have online learning options while maintaining a face-to-face curriculum as well. Then, through the middle part of the year,

all students went into a full-distance model. When we returned to the classroom in February, students could still remain in the full-distance model if they chose. These remained the options for the rest of the year. My study took place in this time period.

The uncertainty of the learning model caused students to change their approach to the school year. As a staff, we noticed a drop-in productivity and an increase in general apathy. Students were unwilling to take on another project, despite my best efforts to explain the aims and immediate benefits of the project.

John, my case study participant, chose the full-distance option through COVID protocols. A year like this forced families to improvise and my participant's situation exemplified that. John, which is not his given name, but for the purposes of anonymity, is how I'll refer to him, while enrolled in the Elk River District, was living with his mom in a small town in northern Minnesota. As the year, and my study, progressed, I learned that he had started traveling between his mom and his dad's house. His dad lives within the district boundaries, thus the reason he could be enrolled in the school. Despite the inconsistencies in his family life and school expectations, all things considered, John was a successful student. He wanted to do well, and this study helped both him and I figure out what worked for him. Earlier in this thesis I cited two articles, one from Butler and the other from Rothman that help to verify John's place as both a Generation Z and an At-Risk student. The quote from Dr. Rothman that stood out was that that stated:

Some research has shown that the brains of Generation Z (Digital Natives) are structurally different from those of earlier generations. This has nothing to do with genetics and everything to do with how we use our brains to respond to things in our environment. . . Interactive games, collaborative projects, advance

organizers, challenges, and anything that they can try and see are appreciated.

The quote from Butler states that: “Ultimately, the teacher should take as much responsibility as possible for students’ learning, and therefore, he should actively present material, guide students through it, and give them necessary time for supervised, independent practice” (Butler 12).

The Butler quote is likely the reason that John gravitated to the more direct-instruction, teacher-led assignment. It was an assignment that forced them to read while scaffolding their understanding with video. The fact that he gravitated to the teacher-led assignment satisfied Rothman’s suggestion of the importance of including complex graphics while the questions I ask and the picture-in-a-picture layover that I provided of myself talking through the concepts helped “guide students through it” and provided “Supervised independent practice”, as Butler would say, is necessary.

Another limitation to this particular study is that each and everyday in class I have many assignments students can complete. I assign work into different categories: daily work and independent study. Independent study is a broad category that might include reading a novel, completing a research paper, or even blogging on a regular basis. Daily work is work that I spend the first 15 minutes of class discussing each day. I often say that if it were me in class, I’d prioritize the daily work then the independent study work. Ultimately, it’s up to each individual student how he or she wants to earn credit for the course. These *The Hunger Games* videos, along with the collaboration emails, and the portfolio assignment, were posted in the daily work category and for the purposes of the study, I wanted a clear distinction between the assignments and asking John to focus on the daily work is how I did that. All told, 105 students had the

opportunity to complete this assignment, John was one of 5 who completed all 4 parts. I presented the lesson to all students just the same, but for him and 4 others this assignment really connected with them and they gravitated toward it. The collaborative emails assignment, while not popular with John, was popular with others. The individual assignment, the Portfolio Assignment, is a bit of an enigma for me. After completing the teacher-led *The Hunger Games* assignment, he started the Portfolio Assignment, but the study, and the school year, came to a close before he could finish the assignment. He was well on his way to working on that and was invested in his topic. All signs pointed to a really interesting portfolio. Because he was at a distance, many of our exchanges were through email. He emailed me one day and presented his topic: "I was starting the persuasion portfolio and had an idea for my topic. I could only think of 3 subprojects to do however. My topic I was thinking about was substance use and long term treatment vs short term" From there we discussed different mediums by which he would present his information. His interest in his topic drove his engagement with the assignment. His interest in his topic was his motivator. Because he was invested in the topic, he was willing to step outside his comfort zone. Completing a podcast was one way that he was initially ready to do that. In an email, he wrote: "It would be really awkward but I will probably give it a try, thank you." There is not much there, but it is effort, a willingness to be vulnerable for a topic that mattered to him. This is the change I hoped to see in the students.

Future studies might garner better participation in a study such as this if factors out of their control were not present. One of the unquestionable student attributes that alternative education staff constantly battle is students' propensity to just give up. The



response to the pandemic exacerbated and highlighted this particular attribute in our students. While their families were likely affected somehow -- maybe financially or in terms of their health, the distance learning model also drastically changed the way they viewed school. The necessity of waking up and going to a school building was an important factor to the success of many students. The ability to sleep in, or conversely, pick up more hours at work directly affected how they prioritized school. As a result, there was less emphasis placed on attending class or engaging with the material.

### **Study of motivation in an English classroom:**

Participation was offered to students, both male and female, in 11th and 12th grade. Attendance in the study was not required, though strongly encouraged. John was asked to complete three assignments all with a different focus. The first was a teacher-led assignment where he viewed video lessons created by me. These lessons worked through the novel *The Hunger Games*. The novel was taught as closely to my usual approach as possible given the unique challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because I couldn't be there with all the students, I narrated four different screen recordings where we worked with different questions and connections along with close reading of meaningful passages. The students answered questions on a program called Edpuzzle which allows me to track their answers in real-time. While I'll always feel that a face-to-face lesson is more impactful, these lessons were sufficient for a student in the Distance Learning Model. We discussed inference skills and theme development.

The second assignment was a student-led Portfolio that I simply provided loose guidelines for. The way I set this assignment up intentionally gave students lots of freedom in their approach. For this assignment, I simply ask that student persuade an audience of something. The topic choice is theirs to make. I did ask that they choose from a variety of mediums to present their information. These mediums included infographics, podcasts, blogs, research papers or interviews among others.

The third assignment was an ongoing collaborative work where students discussed a topic with each other in a forum-like format. I offered a topic that asked students to take a stand. For example, one question was: "Giving kids too many trophies -- or accolades in general -- creates entitled, needy, unresilient adults". Because I know my students, I know that confidentiality is important to them. As a result of this, I set it up as an email sent to a group of students. Those students responded to me, and only me. I then removed their names and copy/pasted their thoughts to an email sent to another small group of students. This process continued for a week. Each student responded to the prompt once. Then, the following week, I started again with the first group and gave each group one more chance to respond. This way each student could respond twice. Particularly with this assignment, I wanted to see their responses grow and evolve. It was my hope to see their responses not only get longer, but more involved as well. Responses that grow with each opportunity would speak to a more motivated student.

## Chapter 4: Findings

There are quantifiable variables in educational studies. The gradebook and attendance rates for example, can give quite clear data, but students, like adults, are complex beings and John was no different. He had many barriers in his personal life, then his academics and society threw more at him. For students like John, school is often the most consistent, constant aspect of their lives. That expectation was turned on its head in 2020 so I was unsure what I would find in the study. Motivation, in turn, can not be judged by quantifiable data alone. His ability to manage his mental health and sobriety matter as well. As a result, it's worth noting that he started to show more interest in his work in the spring, during this study actually, and growth is growth, but I saw some old habits arise too. While the first week of Distance Learning yielded decent work, production began to decline in the ensuing weeks, but his attendance remained steady.

It was clear to me that he was someone who could be successful. This is laudable in and of itself, and it's important to also note that he was staying with his mom in a small out-of-district town in northern Minnesota. This physical distance could have given him reason to abandon school, forego relationships with his teachers, and fall off the radar. He did not let that happen. For these reasons, I was excited when he signed on to the study. Experience with John suggests that the distance model has held him less-than-accountable for completion of his work. However, he approached this study with a zeal that left me excited for what he might accomplish. Previous to entering this study his productivity was weak – only 35%, but in the months of April and May he produced at a rate of 75%. He agreed to join this study and he delivered.

John's history of substance abuse drove his learning in the student-led portion of the assignment, which unfortunately, he did not complete within the time allotted for the study. I do believe, however, that in time, he would complete and turn in an above average assignment, as is his nature. From the beginning of the school year, even as a Distance Learner, he did his best to check in when it was easy not to. Many other Distance Learning students chose to not attend, but he showed up consistently. In addition, particularly during this study, his investment in his work increased as well. It would seem that being in this study was a reason to do well. Extrinsic motivation maybe, but the relationship I had with him might have been a reason to stay invested. The assignments he did complete, which were about half of the assigned work, provided valuable insight as it pertains to my research questions, particularly research question two which states: *How can teachers integrate culturally relevant strategies to support the particular and emotional needs of Generation Z learners?*

I have needed to keep an open mind toward the term "Culturally Relevant" throughout this process because, reflexively, I move to thinking about one's customs and sensibilities related to the his/her heritage and/or country of origin, but, this study is challenging me to analyze Generation Z as a culture, and as such, move away from heritage or nationality as the meaning of culture. This has forced me to analyze what is relevant to them. In this case, how they learn. What I found here is that the culture of Gen Z in this sample size is unique.

At this point in the school year and in our response to the pandemic, I had students in class daily in a hybrid model and at a distance. There were students who I saw Mondays and Wednesday and others I saw on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Everyone

was at home on Fridays. This was done in an effort to social distance for students and families who felt that in-class learning was best for them. The inconsistency of face-to-face student contact that I had prompted me to give these same 3 assignments to all students. These assignments were not study-specific, as in, John being the only one participating. All students were assigned this classwork.

The assignments had different aims all within Dr. Rothman's suppositions. *The Hunger Games* assignment incorporated the more direct-instruction approach as well and the interest in "complex graphics" desired by this generation. The video lesson transitioned between the film version of the story and original text. The goal being that students could connect with the nuance while watching themes and characters develop. Ultimately, it was just an excerpt of the novel. The hope was that, experiencing the story in digestible bites might intrigue students and they might show interest in reading the whole story.

The email assignment that John never did participate in set out to meet students' collaboration tendencies. I pulled names from email responses and pushed them out to different groups of students each day. They could see others' thoughts and respond to each other without feeling vulnerable.

The portfolio assignment was intended to stretch them. I wanted to push the boundaries of how "Bubble wrapped" they really were. Asking them to use technology in a new way challenged them, but not nearly as much as asking them to take a firm stance on a topic and make an argument. That was the real challenge.

John did not complete all of the assignments in the study. There were likely many factors that contributed to the lack of completion. The Distance Learning environment,

time -- or lack thereof -- and the fact that this particular student is in recovery might have all hindered his ability to complete the assignments. The distance learning environment led many families to change their habits. In the case of John, I know he was traveling between his parents' homes, a distance that measured 90 miles and an hour and a half. I also know that he drifted in and out of sobriety. John's background is not dissimilar to others in my class. What did set him apart, however, was his decision to be a distance learner. He was one of only a few who made the choice to stay home entirely.

Time also played a factor because the end of the year was barreling down on him and he ran out of time. Had I run a longer study and begun it in the beginning of the year, he would have completed the assignments. Accounting for all of this, the responses he gave from the work he did complete were interesting.

He completed the teacher-led assignments and was working on the student-led assignments when the study ended. Upon completion, he was tasked with completing a reflection sheet. His insights there were intriguing.

Because I know my students, attacking a full novel is a tall task for them. The common message from me was, "We're not going to read the whole novel in this video lesson, but it is my hope to interest you enough that you might want to read the whole novel after completing this assignment." This strategy allowed me to present to my students many different novels in hopes that a couple would catch the eye of many students and open the door to more reading. Additionally, because this particular assignment was on *The Hunger Games* series and there is a movie adaptation, I advanced the plot of the story using the film in the lesson. The students would read,

answer questions about the reading, then I, as a voiceover, would lead them through a close reading of impactful portions of the text.

As I did that, the student would answer questions that asked them to analyze the greater meaning of the text. Sprinkled throughout as well were the questions they were initially asked. I'd talk about answers to those as well. Despite common teaching practice moving away from direct instruction with the ubiquity of 1:1 device accessibility and the social nature of the students, I held on to a few components of that direct instruction. It was worth it to me to test the idea that students enjoy learning from a trusted source, one with a different worldview, more life experience and one more studied in the topic. In this case, that person was me despite my own insecurities about my worldview, experience and knowledge.

Nevertheless, this message hit home for John. Before I dive into his thoughts on the project, however, I think it's important to acknowledge the individuality that each of us has. What works for him might not work for someone else.

The first question I asked him after completing the assignment was, *what did you enjoy about this project* and his response was: "I enjoyed that we read it in sections and that we go back and read important parts/close read. I have troubles [sic] comprehending what I read a lot of times so this helps a lot."

This was interesting and a valuable insight because it allowed me to see that what I was attempting to do was working. In that short time frame, it did not translate to him wanting to read the full-length novel, but he also knew that he had more assignments to complete part of the study.

This statement squares with the message Maryanne Wolf shares in her article “There’s a crisis of reading among Generation Z” written for *Pacific Standard*. Here she cites Mark Edmundson, Professor of English at The University of Virginia and author of *Why Read*, who is concerned by “how many students no longer have the patience to read denser, more difficult texts like classic literature from the 19th and 20th centuries” (Wolf). Wolf goes on to discuss “Displacement Theory”, a theory put forth by Jean Twenge and others who wrote “The Rise of Digital Media, the Decline of TV, and the (Near) Demise of Print” which states that “82 percent of young people use social media today, which more than likely displaces time they might formerly have given to reading” (Wolf). John is not unique. My short career is full of students who struggle to comprehend what they read, so it was interesting to hear that he appreciated the shortened text and the emphasis on close reading.

Question two spoke directly to the motivation piece that I am most interested in. The question asked: *How would you change this project to make it more appealing to you?* I asked this question because I want to know what will engage the students. This question allows me to tailor my future lessons. John’s answer was telling: “Maybe have a preview of the story and the choice to do the whole story or just the key parts.... It’s not really changing it, but more of a similar project idea. I think it would be nice if we could pick a book of our choice and close read it (answer questions and really think about important parts/go more in depth)”. It would appear that, more than just leading the students through a close read, the students want to do it on their own close reading. It will be important to teach them how to do that. This is interesting though, because it speaks to the autonomy that Generation Z wants as referenced in Seemiller’s



aforementioned TED talk where she said: “the cure for their disengagement is not simply trying to re-engage them in a system that doesn’t seem to work for them. . .

What’s interesting is that, not only are they disrupting these systems, at the same time they’re working right around them and finding other ways to make a difference”

(Seemiller) Generation Z wants control and that is evident here in John’s statement as well.

I asked John to speak for his generation in the next question: *What type of student would like this assignment (Be thinking learning style and interest)?*

His thoughts were as follows: “A student may enjoy this assignment more if they have trouble comprehending what they read, do not like reading long books but like the main idea of the book, and/or if they like close reading.”

This response bolsters the premise because it speaks, again, to the points Maryanne Wolf makes in her aforementioned article where she also states: “The reality is that our young people are changing in ways that are as imperceptible to them as to most adults, particularly in how, what, and why they read” an assertion she supports when she cites Sherry Turkle of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) who argues that “. . .it is as important to recognize which capacities such innovations disrupt or diminish as which ones they expand. We must understand whether our youths’ adaptation to digital affordances is diminishing their use of time-demanding deep reading processes: from background knowledge, inference, and critical analysis to empathy and insight.” Each and every one of these: background knowledge, inference, critical analysis, empathy and insight are all components of reading comprehension. Providing opportunities to be better readers is the ultimate goal of English teaching. The

research being done here is just a small part of that. I believe it's a critical part of that, but it's just a small part.

John saw value not only in the excerpt strategy that -- hopefully -- led to interest in reading the whole novel, but also in the close reading portion of the video that led to greater meaning and put the story in context.

John's most insightful response, and to be honest, I was blown away by all of his responses. The time and care he took to answer the questions shows a maturity beyond his years, but I digress. His most insightful response came to the reflection question: *What did you like about this project that was different from projects we have done previously?* To which he wrote, "I have been doing it with a few assignments recently but I really like the close reading. Also, I liked how with the learning scale we actually did the things on it (identifying the themes with evidence)".

I've written a lot about the importance of close reading and how that aspect has proven effective. What stuck out to me most were his thoughts on the learning scale. As a teacher, especially in recent years, there has been a strong push to make visible a "learning scale" at the beginning of each lesson. This scale includes a goal written in kid-friendly language that is tied to the standard being taught in the lesson. Then there are options for students to rate themselves on a four-point scale.

The bare-bones of the scale are this: If a student rates themselves a "4", they feel that they know the concept so well that they could trade places with the teacher and teach others the concept. A "3" is where teachers would like all students to get to by the end of the lesson(s). A rating of a "3" by a student means that they can accomplish the task asked of them in the goal without any assistance from a teacher. A rating of a "2"

means that a student feels comfortable accomplishing the goal as long as the teacher is nearby walking them through it. A rating of “1” means that the student lacks confidence in accomplishment of the learning goal at all.

Students need more than this though. They need to know what specific evidence, in the story in this case, leads to accomplishing the learning goal. To a great extent, it's up to me as the teacher to show them the way. There is so much that happens in a novel and students are looking for so much in the way of symbolism and comprehension questions, among other things, that they might miss important points that a teacher can help clarify and a close reading helps do that. Careful selection of impactful excerpts goes a long way to helping develop skills and successfully accomplishing learning goals. In the case of this particular assignment, the learning goals were:

1. *To determine the central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development;*
2. *summarize the key supporting details and ideas.*

I identified the theme for the students as “The Value of Camaraderie and Trust in Tough Times”. Then, the selection for close reading I chose shows an important Change in Character, which is a well-known theme-developing signpost in literature. John answered questions about that particular scene including:

- What is the shift that we see in Katniss' character?

*\* A possible answer here is that she doesn't see a relationship with Peeta as a tool to stay alive anymore. She might actually be developing feelings for him.*

John's answer was: "It shows her hard-shell weakening; It shows her caring more about other people; caring enough that she doesn't want to lose Peeta and before she didn't even really want to be associated with him."

In my estimation, this response gets precisely what I hoped he would. He is meeting the learning goal expectations.

Question 2 stated:

- What is the feeling that we as the audience feel (addressing mood) as we read the conversation between Katniss and Peeta?

*\* A possible answer here is that they feel a budding relationship. There is a bit of an "in this together" camaraderie there that progresses these feelings*

John's answer was:

"It feels like they are becoming closer; their relationship is getting stronger and they are staring [sic] to like each other more."

In my estimation John's answer begins to get at what I ask of him here, but his answer could be taken a step farther to address how Katniss no longer sees a relationship as a tool to beat the Hunger Games.

The next question spoke directly to the theme. It was:

- Something is different here. What is different here and how does that difference develop the theme of "Camaraderie and trust in Tough Times"
- *\* A Possible answer here is that Katniss actually enjoyed the kiss between her and Peeta. It didn't feel like just Peeta wanted the relationship anymore. It felt like they both had romantic feelings now.*

John's answer was: "Because Katniss actually enjoyed it and even wanted another. It shows them getting closer to each other and developing a stronger relationship. This also kind of leads to a lot of them working together and helping each other; them being stronger together than by themselves"

In my estimation John's answer gets at what I ask of him because he acknowledges that they are more inclined to work together now. His response in his reflection, however, gets at exactly this point. There is value in being led through close reading. Knowing the theme, we can see how Katniss' change in character develops their camaraderie and trust, as well their renewed investment in each other and beating the Hunger Games. I also took a second to explain further and say during the lesson: Before, Katniss saw the relationship as a tool; therefore, without that emotional connection, when times get tough, she might be more likely to see Peeta as expendable in times of distress. That scene changed that and progressed the theme.

This examination of how close reading helps students understand theme speaks to John's statement from the reflection that said: ". . . but I really like the close reading. Also, I liked how with the learning scale we actually did the things on it (identifying the themes with evidence)"

A close reading helps go beyond the bare bones of a generic learning goal. There becomes a personal connection with close reading. Meaning making is happening and students can see how the theme develops more clearly and even relate it to their own lives. In turn, this speaks to motivation, while this didn't translate to John wanting to read the whole novel. His interest and determination to finish this particular assignment was strong.

The assignment he was working on when the study ended was called the Persuasion Portfolio Assignment. This is an assignment that is largely student-led and opens the door to meaningful engagement with the world. I was excited to offer this assignment because Generation Z wants to be heard rather than “talked at” and the exploratory nature of this assignment begs for that. John started the assignment and was willing to try parts that made him uncomfortable. The assignment called for students to make an argument and express their opinion using different mediums including an infographic, a podcast, a research paper, conduct interviews, build a blog or create a billboard.

John created an infographic and wrote a research paper, but the most apt information that came from his efforts here was his work around the podcast. While this was an assignment he did not finish, His willingness to try tells me a lot about why the design of this particular project engaged him. We had an email exchange about which medium he wanted to work with next. The exchange went as follows:

John: “. . . The third thing was I was wondering if you had any ideas for a possible fourth medium. The ones I plan on doing are an infographic/research paper on long term vs short term treatment, and a blog post/essay on my personal treatment experience.”

Mr. Doimer: “. . . 3) How would you feel about a podcast? I think it would be really interesting to try out that medium. You could record a short podcast about your experiences. Let me know what you think.”

John: “It would be really awkward but I will probably give it a try, thank you.”

Given his, and many other students', barriers, this determination tells me that this pedagogical strategy is motivation for him and thus, a success.

What stuck out for me from this study was John's interest in the direct-instruction assignment. I gave the option to start the study with any of the three assignments. He chose the *Hunger Games* assignment – Direct-instruction. As I mention earlier, his reflections tell the story: “. . . but I really like the close reading. Also, I liked how with the learning scale we actually did the things on it (identifying the themes with evidence)”. He, in particular, did not gravitate to the collaborative assignment. He liked the direct instruction, but he also liked the Persuasive Portfolio assignment that gave him lots of freedom. This is not to say that he is representative of all of Generation Z, as they, like all generations are multi-faceted and cannot be placed in a “box” so to speak. His interest in the *Hunger Games* though, was surprising. Much of my research told me that interactive, collaborative assignments would connect with Gen Zers, but for him, the direct-instruction worked.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

“Motivating Generation Z: A Study of the Unique Learning Styles of a Generation” looked specifically at the current generation occupying the K-12 education system. These students, because they’re Digital Natives, simply view life differently than the generations before them. From Uber to Airbnb to streaming services and social media, The ubiquity of technology has changed many aspects of their lives. It’s only natural that the education world is affected. After all, school is where we spend much of our time in our formative years. However, in many ways, schools have not evolved the way the rest of the world has. The purpose of this study was not to advocate for more technology in the classroom, but instead to look at how the ubiquity of technology has changed the processes of Generation Z. How they learn, how they view the world, how they interact with others, how they’ve been raised and how culture has affected their upbringing all matter. How these factors affected Generation Z drove my research questions which were:

- Generation Z’s upbringing has been described this way: “Their lives have been tightly scheduled, monitored, and bubble–wrapped (protected)” (Rothman 2). How has this nurturing affected their capacity to take risks, be vulnerable, and be independent?
- How can teachers integrate culturally relevant strategies to support the particular and emotional needs of Generation Z learners?

To address these research questions, I considered a couple different methodologies, and ultimately decided that the students should have a say in my discovery process. After all, this is a study about them. So, I landed on YPAR. The YPAR model allows



participants, in this case, my students, to have a say. Their input was most valuable in the reflection portion of each assignment. The focus of the reflection shifted away from reflecting on what they learned and instead on what they liked about the assignment, what they thought could have been done differently, and what type of student would like that particular project. Some questions included:

- When you encountered struggles with this project, how did you deal with them?
- What did you learn from your struggles?
- What type of student would like this assignment (Be thinking about learning style and interest)?
- What do you wish you had known before starting this project?

I took a case study approach to my study. This means that I focused my attention on one student. This student completed one of the three assignments and had started the next when the study, and the school year, ended. I presented all three of the assignments at once, so he knew the parameters of the student-led, the teacher-led, and the collaborative assignment. He chose to complete the teacher-led assignment first, he was partially done with the student-led assignment when the study ended and he chose not to engage in the collaborative assignment. This is quite telling.

Interestingly, he engaged mostly with the teacher-led assignment. This squares with my research on direct instruction, but I also know he was interested in the student-led assignment, which was in fact a much larger assignment -- this could have been a factor in his decision to start with the teacher-led assignment as well. It also squares with Dr. Arlene Nicholas' finding from "Preferred Learning Methods of Generation Z" where she cites a finding from Seemiller and Grace 2016: "Generation Z prefers to work

independently even in a team setting through google docs” (Nicholas 4). The understanding that Generation Z might prefer to work alone, is not only a change from Millennials – The previous generation, but it also explains a lot about John’s approach.

The implications of these findings on teacher practice are important because advancements in technology aren’t showing signs of slowing and the education world needs to account for how these changes affect the students. Understanding that, as Dr. Rothman argues, the neurological makeup of Generation Z is quite literally different than generations before as a result of technology and that choices by policy makers -- Namely NCLB and its transition to ESSA -- and their parents, have molded their worldview. Dr. Seemiller articulates their mindset in a uniquely apt way when, at her TEDx event, she said: “What’s interesting is that, not only are they disrupting these systems, at the same time they’re working right around them and finding other ways to make a difference” (Seemiller).

It’s important for teachers to recognize that they are in a unique position in 2021 - - and likely beyond -- to provide opportunities for students to have an audience, to make tangible change. While that might, and likely will, mean that technology is included, technology for technology’s sake is not the answer. Understanding how technology has affected them and exploiting those qualities is a skill that teachers need to develop and add to their repertoire. This is also what makes teaching and art, and necessary. The distance learning period -- and for that matter, the vastness of platforms like YouTube, where, albeit valuable, information is posted -- has helped develop an impression that students can learn solely online. This study reinforces that that idea is not true. Just as teachers have always been tasked with knowing when to push and/or ease back on

their students, the same is true with technology use. Just because computers, or social media, or online education programs exist, doesn't mean that they must be used or it's not effective teaching. Teachers need to be able to understand that tone and climate of their students and classroom and do what is best at that moment.

Given time and opportunity, further research to consider might include not only what technology is most useful. Carefully examining and intentionally choosing particular technology can have an exponential benefit, but also being constantly aware of the changes in Generation Z and being able to present opportunities to learn that they see value in. Assignments that allow them to make a difference in the way they see fit while challenging their abilities and perspectives is paramount as a teacher. Researching how to meet their needs is a constant quest and what makes teaching such a rewarding endeavor.

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