

Teaching the Gen-Z Percussionist

By Dr. Jeffrey Barudin

“When I was their age...” Every young person hears it and swears they’ll be different, yet 30 years later they find themselves shaking their heads and muttering that same phrase. Understandably, this is especially prevalent among teachers. As we get older, our students stay the same age. We know first-hand the quirks and intricacies of our students, both positive and negative. But what do we do with this knowledge?

As teachers, we can become routine-based in our educational approach, especially when dealing with a specific set of skills such as percussion instrumental technique. We know what a good timpani roll sounds like because of what we learned from our teachers. We tend to teach timpani rolls to our students using those same methods. But because learning is not always linear, we need to be able to adjust our methodology to the situation. Our job is to ensure that our students are getting the information they need, presented to them in a relatable way.

In this article, I address three unique characteristics I’ve noticed with the current crop of students at my university, all of them members of “Generation-Z” (people born between the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s). I also discuss the teaching approach I use to best align with their methods of comprehension and integration. I am certainly not suggesting that my methods are the best or most valid; however, these methods have worked for me. My goal is to encourage my fellow teachers to be more comfortable thinking outside the box and to consider how you can best reach your own Gen-Z students.

SOME GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT GENERATION-Z STUDENTS

The following bullet points present some of the more common positive and negative characteristics of Gen-Z students¹ (keeping in mind not all students will display these traits).

Positive Characteristics

- They want to have a positive impact on the world and are willing to achieve that through activism and a more global, inclusive mindset.
- They will both participate in and actively create activities they enjoy, particularly those that are media-based.
- They have never known a world without the tech-

nological advancements we see today and can use and integrate technology intuitively.

Negative Characteristics

- They have no patience for learning, particularly a topic that may seem ancillary or irrelevant to their educational goals.
- They rely on instant gratification.
- They prefer information be provided for them, rather than search or work for themselves.
- They are afraid of failure, to the point of not trying if failure is a possibility.

There are many more defining characteristics of Gen-Z students; the internet is teeming with articles and journal entries that have researched this topic. My goal is to show how attention to these differences can enhance our Gen-Z students’ education. What follows are three broad topics, the issues I have encountered, and my solutions to those issues.

STUDENT-TEACHER HIERARCHY AND COMMUNICATION

Generation-Z students tend to be wary of authority figures, including teachers. One way they cope with this is to treat those relationships casually. Their ideal student-teacher relationship is not hierarchical, but to use the teacher as a guide while exploring new experiences and ideas. Students also have less patience for teachers who are not engaging, due to shorter attention spans and the vast amount of information they can readily access online.

If you have developed a successful relationship with your students, they have *chosen* to learn from you rather than from the many other sources available to them. Teachers need to earn their students’ trust by appealing to their specific, and typically unspoken, learning demands. Of course, the depth of this relationship is variable depending on one’s comfort level. The following is a breakdown of some ways I maintain a positive working relationship with my students:

- If a student sends me a friend request or asks to follow me through social media networks, I allow it; I do not send these requests myself. I am cautious about what I post, “like,” and follow, knowing that my actions are visible to them. However, this is not done for my students’ sake; I typically follow

the rule that if I wouldn’t say something in person, I won’t say it online.

- Students no longer rely on emails, and I find it difficult to get them to read and respond to them. While I do encourage them to check their email on a daily basis, it’s worth it to find a better way to maintain communication with them. My school uses Canvas as our online educational system, through which I can send announcements as text messages to the students. Students are instantly notified when they receive my message, and as a result I’ve seen a dramatic increase in student communication.
- I provide my students with my cell phone number and encourage them to text me when they need me for something. It’s quicker than email, and also upholds a sense of camaraderie. I do not have an “acceptable window” of texting. If I receive a text at 10:00 P.M. from a student with a question, why wouldn’t I answer? I don’t consider receiving a text as being bothersome, and I encourage those who do to reconsider. Teaching is not a 9-to-5 profession.

STUDENTS AND TECHNOLOGY

Gen-Z students have a different relationship with technology from any previous generation. They have never known a world without Wi-Fi, YouTube, Google, or Facebook. Their first phone was a smartphone, and they use tablets just as much as—if not more than—computers. To Gen-Z, technology is as essential as food, shelter, and air. Despite this, I have found my students’ skills using technology as a learning and research tool are severely lacking.

Here is the truth of the matter: as a 40-year-old professor, I still compare using technology to using encyclopedias, CDs, and card catalogs. When I need to look something up, I can find it online in ten seconds rather than traveling to the library. To me, technological advancements are just that—advancements of the methods I used as a student. To Generation-Z students, technology is not an advancement; it is a constant that has always been there. For them, doing work online isn’t “quicker,” it’s just doing work. With this knowledge, it’s not that students are unaware of what is available to them online. They simply need motivation to just do the work. Here are some specific technological topics and resources that I have found to be useful.

Gen-Z students are afraid of failure, to the point of not trying if failure is a possibility.

- I encourage my students to learn about percussion repertoire through YouTube searches. When working on a piece of music, I have them find numerous recordings of the piece to evaluate performances and inform their musical choices. When I assign an orchestral excerpt, I require them to find at least 4–5 different versions to learn about the variations found within performers' and conductors' interpretations. (Depending on the piece, I can also have them download the score from IMSLP, another fantastic online resource.)
- When students and I are discussing large-scale topics such as recital repertoire, grad school choices, and interview preparation, I always tell them to talk with more people than just myself. Learning how to make use of the many networking opportunities online is very important, as is hearing different opinions. I start by recommending they search for groups on Facebook and other social media sites that would be relevant to the topic. There are other online forums they could use as well, including the PAS website.
- My current students have new concepts of ownership. They rarely buy physical copies of media, because much of it is available in online formats. This goes for audio music, but also sheet music, textbooks, and other learning resources. To go even further, one can often find these files as free, frequently illegal downloads. I require my students to purchase the books and music they learn from and perform, which sometimes means paying for a PDF download rather than a physical copy. The act of paying for media helps students develop their sense of ownership, which is important as physical materials become obsolete. Also, it's necessary that my students understand a musician's financial responsibility to support and encourage composers and fellow performers.

STUDENT DILIGENCE

Perhaps the most pervasive critique of Gen-Z students is their lack of work ethic. This shows itself in numerous ways, such as dedicating little time to practicing, giving the bare minimum on assignments, and showing little interest in self-learning and research. I believe a primary cause of this behavior is a fear of failure. This has been a consistent and debilitating issue for my students.

I believe a musician's fear of failure stems from a lack of confidence in his or her musicianship and/or playing ability. Perhaps my most important role as a professor is helping my students develop their confidence. Confidence—as opposed to ego—includes

trusting both your ability to perform as needed and your musical awareness and knowledge to make the right decisions. Building one's confidence is a lengthy yet rewarding process when integrated into lesson and ensemble scenarios, such as:

Creating achievable performance situations: Find excerpts or phrases that students can perform without pause to help them gain a sense of completion and accomplishment. If they know completion is attainable, they will be more motivated to work on more difficult sections.

Finding words to describe feelings and emotions: This is easier said than done. After playing, I have my students tell me how they think they did, what went well or poorly, and the steps needed to fix any mistakes. Using words gives concreteness to feelings or emotions that tend to be amorphous, and often facilitates problem solving.

Convincing students that failure is their friend: Without failure, learning is impossible. Success comes to students who can learn from their mistakes rather than dwell on them.

CONCLUSION

For us to reach our students, our concept of the teacher-student relationship needs to evolve. Generation-Z wants to have a say in the creation of their culture, which includes their education. If we don't recognize how our students prefer to learn, they will never reach their potential. Our responsibility as educators is to continue learning alongside our students. I challenge you to stay open-minded and learn about your students' predilections, concerns, and aspirations in order to achieve long-lasting, positive results.

ENDNOTE

1. As found at https://sites.google.com/a/uis.edu/colrs_cook/home/engaging-generation-z-students

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