Engaging Gen Z

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Who is Gen Z?

Diverse

- Most racially diverse generation to date
- Neurodiversity is something important to consider

Values-Based

- Politically and socially moderate to liberal
- Compassionate because of instant knowledge about current events
- Equality and diversity is important to them

Tech-Saavy

- Texting and social media
- Communication
- Making decisions

Fraught with Social-Emotional Struggles

- Fears due to cultural issues
- Mental health issues
- Strained relationships

World-Changers

- Innovation and entrepreneurship
- Fundraising and philanthropy
- Desire to solve problems and influence the world

"Post-Christian"

- Spiritual, but not attending church
- Spiritually illiterate and inarticulate
- Inclusive and afraid to offend
- Flexible moral compass
- "Moral Therapeutic Deism"

What are some effective instructional methods to engage Gen Z in the learning process?

Create an appropriate learning environment:

Make a space.

- Like to socialize, study, and collaborate in groups.
- Makerspaces and craft shops
- Places to work alone.

Provide a safe environment.

- Mental health support
- Supportive, affirming environment.
- Financial training and support
- Safety and security must be a priority.

Let them lead.

- Prefer the teacher to facilitate their learning (guide on the side, not sage on the stage); want to learn alongside the teacher!
- Individualism is important to them, and that includes in discipline and consequences.
- Provide personalization: flexibility, options, various timelines, and tracks.
- Teach them how to navigate conflict with respect and problem-solving skills.

Make it real.

- Brief but powerful information.
- Use technology . . . don't fight it.
- Authentic, real-world learning and problem-solving experiences that prepare them for the future and to create social change.
- Set small goals that lead to reward, including gamification tools like gadgets to monitor progress and motivate toward completion.

Prepare them for the future.

- Align learning outcomes with college, career, ministry, and industry standards.
- Soft skills, technical, and leadership competencies are a must.
- Provide academic and community partnerships for networking, saving money, entering the workforce faster, and entering college ahead of the game.
- Teach them to accept feedback and even mistakes are merely a means for growth and where questions lead to growth, experimentation, and self-reflection.

Transformative learning as a framework:

Transformative Learning:

- Andragogical theory of learning (Mezirow, 1991)
- Transformative Learning is not just about gaining new factual knowledge or skills but involves being changed in some way by what one learns. It involves applying knowledge and self-reflection.

Examples:

- Experiential learning
- Culminating Capstone Projects
- Intentional Service Learning
- Travel and Cultural Exposure
- Internships and Work-Based Experiences
- Entrepreneurship
- Curricular Community Engagement
- Intercultural Communication Programs
- Formal and Informal Mentorship Programs
- Learning Communities

The Bible for the Real World, Everyday:

Make a space.

- Biblical and worldview instruction needs to be more than just in Bible class!
- Need to learn basic theology and apologetics.
- Would benefit from spiritual mentors who can teach them to have a strong theology that they can live in the real world
- Barna suggests reaching Gen Z through "vocational discipleship," emphasizing the meaning and theological significance of work and calling and helping young people understand how to integrate work, career, and calling.

Provide a safe environment.

- Need to feel safe to ask questions, express doubts, and process what they encounter in culture.

- Need to interact with knowledgeable adults who are communicating what they believe and why and who provide opportunities for students to express what they believe.

Let them lead.

- "Churches can help Gen Z with developing a Christian worldview that exemplifies Christian virtues that sustain their compassion and concern for others. Gen Z can teach adults about the importance of loving those who are different from them, and adults can teach Gen Z about how a genuine Christian love is rooted in the God of truth (Deut. 32:4; John 14:6; John 16:13)." (Esqueda, 2018)

Make it real.

- Give them experiences to verbalize what they believe.
- Give them opportunities to engage their own community and other cultures.
- Allow them to live out the gospel, building relationships with non-believers (*The Gospel Comes with a Housekey*, by Rosaria Butterfield

Prepare them for the future.

- Called to be an "authentic Christian that is meaningfully worldly" (Azurdia III, 2009)
- Called to holiness, not morality.
- Sent to share the gospel to a world in need.
    - NOT cultural gluttony: missional but no theology
    - NOT cultural anorexia: theological but no mission

Generations are cyclical every twenty years (Rickes, 2016)

- Archetypes including Idealist (Boomers), Reactive (Gen Xers), Civic (Millennials), and Adaptive (Silent Generation and now back to the Gen Zers)
- Can consider, then, the Silent Generation to make predictions about Gen Z
- Silent Generation brought great reformers (MLK, Jr., Shirley Temple, Sandra Day O'Connor)
- **CHALLENGE:** ***Which change-makers will this generation bring forth, and how will Christian schools be a part of shaping them to make that change for Christ?***

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Engaging "Gen Z": Teaching Worldview to Teens

I. Why is teaching worldview to teens so important?

A. Young people today represent the leaders of tomorrow – This is an absolutely critical mission field!

B. But they are too often thrust into the cultural wilderness with a broken compass…and they don't even know it.

C. Challenges facing teens today:

1. Moral relativity – Feelings over facts

   It used to be that science was favored over Christianity as facts over faith (a.k.a. "fiction"). Now, even science has fallen prey to feelings (e.g. biological gender vs. preferred gender).

   This "me first" mentality creates hurdles for understanding and growth.

2. Digital natives – The world is one click away via the internet, social media, and cell phones. Teenagers are more sophisticated, but not more mature.

3. "The Scandal of Biblical Illiteracy" – https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/the-scandal-of-biblical-illiteracy-its-our-problem-1218766.html

4. Clash of worldviews and competing allegiances

5. "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD)" – According to a recent study, the beliefs of teens can be summed up this way:

   a. "A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth."

   b. "God wants people to be good, nice, fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions."

   c. "The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself."

   d. "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem."

   e. "Good people go to heaven when they die."[1]

6. Making a case for Truth

   a. According to the late Chuck Colson, "83 percent of teenagers see moral truth as a pretense."[2]

b. Even more alarming, George Barna has discovered that regarding absolute truth, "only 9% of born-again teens believe in moral absolutes and just 4% of non-born-again teens believe there are moral absolutes."[3]

c. The primary basis for moral decision-making is moral relativism, "doing whatever feels right or comfortable in a situation."[4]

d. The significance of this reality:

i. Without a belief in absolute Truth, we cannot teach any other aspect of the Christian worldview.

ii. We must use innovative methods and real-world examples to help teens understand the importance of absolute Truth.

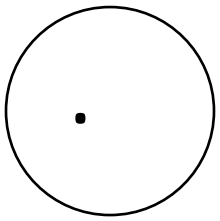
iii. What are some creative ways you can help your students understand the concept of absolute Truth?

D. What is our goal in teaching worldview to teenagers?

1. Biblical Literacy: Understanding the Christian worldview – Do our young people know God's Story? Do they know God's Word?

2. Apologetics: Defending the Christian worldview – Can they defend the reasons for their faith (1 Peter 3:15-16)? We cannot defend that which we do not know.

a. C. S. Lewis' "Dot-in-the-Circle" diagram – used to help someone embrace the pursuit of Truth with humility. One foundational goal as educators is to inspire life-long learning.



The circle is drawn to illustrate all of the cumulative knowledge from the beginning of human history until now.

The dot represents how much of that knowledge you think you possess.

Questions to ask:

Q: Is it possible that there is something(s) you don't know?

Q: Is it possible, then, that there is a God beyond your limited understanding?

3. Life transformation: How is the Christian worldview changing your life and the lives of other people around you? If all teens can do is intellectually defend their faith, we have forsaken our primary calling.

E. How can we go about reaching this goal?

II. Teaching methods/strategies:

A. Building bridges – follow Paul's example on Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-34)

1. Know your audience – Who are teens? What do they care about?

2. Build bridges into their world – Identify something/someone within your audience's a frame of reference – What are some bridge builders you might be able to use?

3. Use that as a link to the Gospel message you want to present.

4. Ground your message in God's Word (Note: Be sure to move beyond the bridge building illustration to Scripture. Many well-intentioned people do not make the transition, leaving their message grounded on something other than God's Word.)

B. Using the Socratic teaching method:

1. This involves a question-based dialogue, not monologue lecturing

2. You direct the "conversation" with your teens using questions that stem from questions or comments they have made.

3. You should always keep in mind where you want to take your teens with the discussion, using your questions (and their questions) to move them in that direction. This may mean developing at least 3 questions that follow a logical flow from the start of your discussion to where you want to conclude (The last question should usually relate to the practical application of the topic.)
4. The advantage of this interactive teaching method is that it tends to engage the audience much more readily. Also, if done correctly by the teacher, the students end up answering their own questions, which better solidifies the information in their minds.
5. While this teaching method may come more easily to some educators, it can be learned through effort and application. The following are some techniques for developing greater expertise in this method:
    a. To get the conversation going you might…
        i. Address assumptions students may have about whatever the topic is – Ask yourself, "What assumptions might my audience be bringing to this discussion?"
        ii. Paint a scenario that your audience can relate to and unpack it with your first key question. Some of the best scenarios are real-life case studies that relate to the teaching topic.
        iii. Ask a thought-provoking, startling, or provocative question to grab the attention of your audience and set the stage for where you want to go with the topic.
    b. To keep the conversation moving… Questions to ask:
        i. "Why?"
        ii. "Are you sure?"
        iii. "How does that make you feel?"
        iv. What other questions might you be able to use effectively?

III. Practical application – "So what?":
    A. This is one of the most important aspects of any teaching session. We must help young people recognize that Christianity is real and relevant to their lives.
    B. Any one of these questions may be running through a teen's mind as you teach:
        1. "Why should I care?"
        2. "Why should I take the time to learn this stuff?"
        3. "How does what we are studying actually affect my life?"

C. Your goal is to give pertinent answers to these questions in your teaching. For example, know where you want to go when a student asks him/herself…

1. What does this whole idea of worldview mean to me?
2. How does the character of God affect my life?
3. I'm not into science, why should I care about evolution?
4. Why should the deity of Christ matter to me?
5. If someone (like my trans friend) wants to do something that doesn't affect me, why should I care?
6. Etc…

D. What are some ways you can practically apply the various aspects of the Christian worldview when teaching?

IV. General observations:

A. It is important to remember that teaching this particular group of people can in many ways be a cross-cultural experience for us. Just like a missionary in a foreign land, if we are to engage with those in our mission field, we must truly know and understand them.

B. We need to make Christianity real and relevant for teens, helping them understand that the Christian worldview properly synthesizes all of life.

C. As young people engage their world, it is imperative that they have been trained to think critically about the different issues which will confront them. 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 reminds us, "Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil."

D. Most importantly, we cannot teach what we do not know ourselves. If we are to effectively engage with young people about the Christian worldview, we must be living it out ourselves.

Resources:

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Worldview Organizations and Websites:

Colson Center – colsoncenter.org

Josh McDowell Ministry – josh.org

Summit Ministries – summit.org

Worldview Academy – worldview.org

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NOTES

[1] This information is taken from the study conducted by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton with the National Study of Youth and Religion at the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) and is summarized in Gene Edward Veith, "A nation of deists." *WORLD* 25 June 2005, 28.
[2] Chuck Colson and Harold Fickett, *The Good Life: Seeking Purpose, Meaning and Truth in Your Life*. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2005), 188.
[3] George Barna, "Teenagers," http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=37
[4] George Barna, "Americans Are Most Likely to Base Truth on Feelings," 12 February 2002, http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?PageCMD=Print

3 Ideas for Engaging Gen Z

Big Idea: What are the most effective methods for equipping and encouraging members of Gen Z to share and live out their faith in quickly changing times? Here are three ideas:

1. Show and Tell.

    A. Christianity is both true and _____ (Psalm 34:8.)
    B. Your most persuasive tool in a hyper-individualistic society is your own _____.
    C. Share stories (preferably in video format) that collapse the secular narrative around key Biblical truth claims.
    D. Explain and model the Christian life as a _____ marked by purpose, sacrifice and eternal significance.

Questions:

- How can we more effectively communicate that Christianity is both true and good?
- What are some issues/areas where culture has convinced many (even Christians) that Biblical teaching is harmful or at least obsolete?
- What stories in our own school community should we highlight? What national/global figures should we highlight?
- What historical and Biblical stories should we use to explain the Christian life as a grand opportunity to join God in His plans to redeem the world? How can we better exemplify this truth in our own lives?

2. Connect the dots – with them.

    A. Jesus modeled discipleship by teaching _____ (Mark 10:32).
    B. Help Gen Z connect the dots between Christianity's truth and goodness by doing good with them.
    C. Since Gen Z is the "loneliest generation," serving together as a community of believers impacts worldview formation and school culture.
    D. According to Governor Holcomb, The "Big 3" community needs in Indiana are _____, _____, and _____.

Questions:

- Do you have any personal examples of learning a key truth or life lesson "on the way" (i.e., while discussing an issue on a trip or in passing rather than in a formal educational setting)?
- What are some ways that you, your class and your school can serve God together at school?
- What are some ways that you, your class and your school can serve God together in your community?

3. Follow the Leader.

A. The forgotten figure in the story of Daniel and his friends is _____.
B. Gen Z wants to change the world without _____, but that is not how Christ transformed hearts and minds.
C. Since Gen Z is skeptical of authority, the best approach is to point students to Christ and the authority of Scripture as the foundation of their faith.
D. Why Luke 9:23 is the most countercultural and perhaps the most important verse for this cultural moment.

Questions

- Does your school have a class or program that teaches students to evangelize their peers? If not, what are the next steps for starting one? If so, how can this be improved with a focus on practical application?
- How should we prepare students for an increasingly hostile culture that may punish them for their beliefs (censure among peers, lost economic opportunities, etc.)?
- What issues should we equip students to engage in a winsome, compassionate but truthful way?