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Integrating Experiential and Problem-Based Learning for Generation Z and Alpha: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of educational strategies, focusing on experiential and problem-based learning (PBL) in the context of Generation Z and Generation Alpha. Drawing from recent literature, it highlights technological advancements, learner preferences and pedagogical innovations. The discussion emphasises how these approaches cater to the unique characteristics of both generations, while offering actionable insights to design effective learning environments.

Keywords

Experiential learning, Problem-based learning, Generation Z, Generation Alpha

Introduction

The emergence of Generation Z and the subsequent Generation Alpha has introduced unique challenges and opportunities in education. As digital natives, both generations exhibit distinct preferences for technology-driven, interactive and meaningful learning experiences. Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010, grew up during the rise of the internet and social media, whereas Generation Alpha, born from 2010 onwards, is immersed in an even more advanced technological landscape dominated by artificial intelligence (AI) and ubiquitous connectivity. This article synthesises findings from recent studies to present a cohesive understanding of how experiential and problem-based learning frameworks can be adapted to meet the demands of these generations.

Literature Review

Experiential Learning for Generation Z

Hernandez-de-Menendez et al. (2020) underscore the role of immersive technologies, like augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), in enhancing experiential learning (EL). These technologies create dynamic, interactive environments that foster engagement and practical skills. Gamification elements further support engagement by introducing challenges, rewards and instant feedback mechanisms. While projects addressing social impact, such as

sustainability or community improvement, resonate deeply with Generation Z's values, offering a sense of purpose alongside learning. To illustrate, Gardner et al. (2018) advocate for community-based partnerships as a transformative approach to experiential learning. By collaborating with local organisations, students gain real-world experience while addressing community needs. This strategy not only enhances learning outcomes, but also builds civic responsibility, they argue, addressing criticisms that traditional experiential models often lack utility and depth. Additionally, Seemiller et al. (2019) highlight Generation Z's preference for applied, hands-on learning and recognition-based methodologies. Their findings suggest that achievement-oriented learners thrive in environments that balance theoretical concepts with practical applications, further supporting the integration of real-world relevance in educational strategies.

Problem-Based Learning for Generation Z

Problem-based learning emphasises collaboration, critical thinking and the application of interdisciplinary knowledge. Lavado-Anguera et al. (2024) explore how PBL can incorporate sustainability, multi-disciplinary approaches and simulation technologies. This holistic model aligns with Generation Z's desire for education that prepares them to tackle complex global challenges. While Kenny and Gunter (2023) argue for enriching PBL through storytelling and design thinking. These additions enhance creativity and encourage students to approach problems from diverse perspectives. By integrating narrative techniques and iterative design processes, this can deepen learners' understanding of problem-solving methodologies, they conclude. Scott (2017) highlights the value of combining PBL with action learning in leadership development. This integrative framework emphasises evidence-based evaluation, enabling continuous refinement of educational strategies to ensure relevance and effectiveness in real-world contexts.

Generation Alpha and Educational Trends

Generation Alpha represents an evolution of digital nativity, characterised by an innate familiarity with AI-driven tools, automation and personalised technologies. Hernandez-de-Menendez et al. (2020) highlight the importance of hyper-personalised learning experiences for Generation Alpha. Adaptive learning platforms, capable of tailoring content to individual needs, will be critical in meeting their expectations. Additionally, their preference for visual and gamified content underscores the need to leverage AR, VR and gamification extensively, they emphasise.

Compared with Generation Z, Alpha learners exhibit even shorter attention spans, requiring micro-learning modules and bite-sized content. These learners also demand seamless integration of emerging technologies, such as blockchain for accreditation and AI for real-time feedback. The generation's heightened global connectivity fosters a collaborative and multi-cultural mindset, making cross-cultural projects and global perspectives essential in curriculum design (Hernandez-de-Menendez et al., 2020).

Comparative Analysis

Both Generation Z and Alpha share a reliance on technology and a desire for meaningful, impactful education. However, the nuances between these generations demand tailored approaches. Generation Z, while adept at adapting to technology, values structured and recognition-based learning. In contrast, Generation Alpha, having grown up with advanced AI and automation, expects education to be highly interactive, personalised and visually engaging.

Experiential learning for Generation Z often revolves around community-based projects and social impact themes. For Generation Alpha, these projects must integrate cutting-edge technologies and gamified elements to maintain engagement (Hernandez-de-Menendez et al., 2020). Similarly, PBL frameworks must evolve to incorporate the storytelling and design thinking that resonate with both generations (Kenny and Gunter, 2023), while also leveraging AI-powered tools to provide real-time adaptability for Alpha learners.

Empirical Research

This is reflected in my own theoretical framework for teaching, which is similarly founded on experiential learning combined with problem-based teaching, drawing on my background as a practitioner in consultancy. I have experienced first-hand the impact on students and, reflecting on my time teaching, I can see how student needs and preferences have changed over time. This is particularly accentuated following the pandemic and it is evident that the needs of Generation Z and Generation Alpha are markedly different from those of previous generations, even students from just 10 years ago. Their preference for experiential and problem-based learning, particularly involving the use of technology, is evident rather than traditional theoretical persuasion.

In a number of instances, I have experimented with these approaches in my own teaching practice. Examples would include co-facilitating a teaching session utilising the Metaverse as a virtual learning environment. This enabled students to create content, collaborate and experiment within a simulated, immersive virtual world. This built upon the success of the previous year, which had seen the first teaching session at Lancaster University to use technical advancements to live link multiple online students with individual student groups in the lecture theatre via Microsoft Teams, using hybrid breakout rooms. With online guests 'present' via mobile phone or tablet connecting with individual student groups in the room and working collaboratively in a synchronous hybrid learning experience.

A further example would include setting up groups of students as ‘consultancy teams’ to solve real-world problems for well-known businesses facing new or unprecedented challenges, such as a digital disruptor entering the market. Students identified critical issues, developed strategic responses and presented their proposals to peers role-playing as investors or board members. This dynamic format fosters critical thinking, collaborative problem-solving and real-world application of theoretical concepts (Kenny & Gunter, 2023).

My involvement in these pedagogical approaches has prompted my deeper reflection on the value of technology-enhanced learning and the importance of designing activities that challenge students to apply theory in practice. This includes the adoption of tools, like Mentimeter and Kahoot, which introduce elements of gamification to stimulate engagement and participation during sessions. These tools have proved especially effective with students responding positively to interactive and competitive elements embedded within learning experiences. The impact has been tangible, with students providing positive feedback through informal comments, emails and improved module evaluation scores, demonstrating the effectiveness of these methods (Mouza, 2009). Taken together, these examples provide empirical grounding for the integration of experiential and problem-based learning and demonstrate how such methods can be tailored to meet the unique preferences and expectations of Generation Z and Alpha learners.

Implications for Practice

Technology Integration

Drawing from these empirics, harnessing the potential of technology, including AR, VR and AI, to create immersive, engaging learning experiences is becoming paramount. For Generation Z, these technologies enhance interaction and applicability. For Generation Alpha, they are foundational to the learning process, requiring seamless integration into every aspect of education.

Real-World Applications

Projects and problems should address pressing global and societal challenges, from climate change to equity in technology access. Both generations value purpose-driven education that connects theoretical knowledge to real-world impact, fostering a sense of responsibility and achievement.

Collaborative Frameworks

Storytelling and design thinking provide tools to enhance creativity and teamwork. These methods allow learners to approach problems holistically, considering multiple perspectives and iterative solutions. Collaboration should also extend globally, reflecting Generation Alpha's multi-cultural and connected world view. Continuous evaluation is essential to ensure educational strategies remain relevant and effective. Evidence-based approaches, combined with flexible adaptation, will allow the refining of methods to align with the evolving needs of learners.

Conclusion

The evolving characteristics of these generations necessitate a re-thinking of educational strategies. By integrating experiential and problem-based learning frameworks with advanced technologies, environments can be created that are engaging, meaningful and effective. These approaches not only prepare learners for current challenges, but also instil adaptability and lifelong learning skills essential for future success. Further research is required to explore the long-term outcomes of these strategies and investigate their scalability across diverse educational contexts.

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Author Profile

Richard Baguley is a Senior Teaching Associate in the Department of Entrepreneurship and Strategy at Lancaster University Management School. As an educator and facilitator, Richard is passionate about developing teaching pedagogies that empower learners, enable equity of opportunity and potential, recognising the differing needs of Generation Z and Generation Alpha learners.

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