The Z-Shift: Changing preferences in higher education learning modalities

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the learning modality perspectives of Generation Z traditional-aged college students. A quantitative study was conducted with 926 research participants enrolled in at least one university-level marketing course. The hybrid modality was the most popular course format among the college students in this sample. Results from this quantitative study suggest new contributions to the literature that shed light on progressive learning modality preferences by Generation Z students that may affect future workforce preferences.

Keywords: Gen Z, Higher Education, Instructional Modality, Workforce Implications
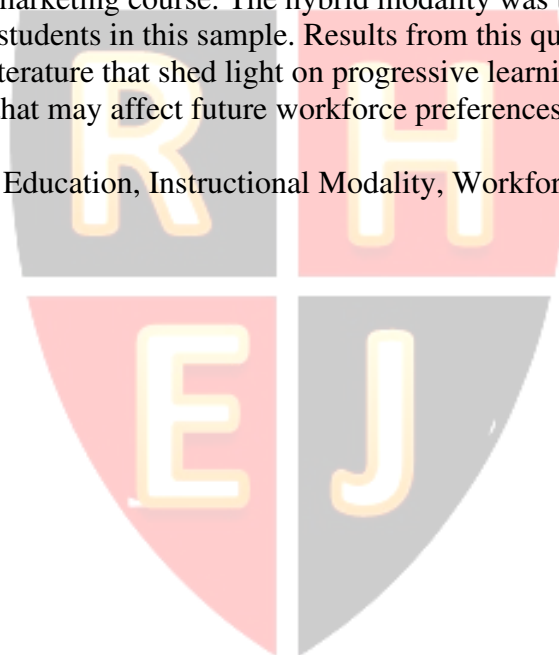
INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic not only sparked change on a global scale regarding how courses are delivered overall, but recent research also suggests that it has begun to shift a large majority of college students' preferences and expectations for how they desire higher education to be offered. "Reflecting back and looking to the future, it appears the nature of learning and teaching is starting to shift" (Cooker et al., 2022, p. xi). The role of higher education is fundamentally critical in our world, as are the opportunities and call to action to evolve the academy. We may not be able to solve a massive systemic problem overnight; however, we can work to make strides toward improving and redesigning the higher education system to better align with modern times for a more hopeful and flexible future.

To develop a more contemporary and sustainable model, higher education stakeholders and leaders should continually reflect inward and backward to learn from the experiences and trends that occurred after the COVID-19 global pandemic began to make future improvements. This includes reevaluating the ways in which college courses are delivered and how learners can be best supported and prepared for the workforce and ultimately contribute effectively to society at large. "The new education must prepare our students to thrive in a world of flux, to be ready no matter what comes next" (Davidson, 2022, p. 255). College students are important stakeholders in higher education and should be provided a platform to express their voices and preferences to help shape higher education's future.

REFLECTING AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

There have been numerous types of work and instructional formats developed and implemented in the workforce and in higher education since the turn of the century; however, most organizations operated under traditional ways of working and going to school. For example, most traditional-aged college students attending traditional four-year institutions of higher learning still took most or all their classes in the traditional face-to-face (F2F) delivery mode.

Research is beginning to reveal that, with increased levels of experience taking courses and working in different ways, people are recognizing the possibilities and benefits of hybrid modalities in both physical and digital workspaces. For example, most learners became aware of and gained first-hand exposure to various learning spaces available after the COVID-19 pandemic began. This was a major turning point for learners of higher education institutions as they experienced various pedagogical formats in new ways and became cognizant of expanded opportunities that come along with blended work environments. Updated empirical research on this topic will help understand the shifting student perspectives and preferences and inform the strategic development of techniques that effectively intertwine the most student-centric elements of each course delivery mode to stimulate and enhance teaching and learning outcomes to thrive in the evolving workforce landscape.

Early Pandemic Effects on U. S. College Students

Many higher education institutions across the United States were on spring break when the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, and institutional leaders and educators initially wrestled with how to maintain academic continuity by shifting vast numbers of in-person courses to the online academic environment. Understandably, many educators were caught off-guard,

overwhelmed, and not prepared to instruct in the digital realm when the pandemic disruption occurred (Goria, 2021). There was a very short window of time to switch F2F courses to the online environment, which affected students in different ways.

Triggered by the pandemic, the emergency remote teaching method became known as ERT and is distinct from intentional online education. ERT is transient in nature with the main goal being educational continuity to respond to a crisis and avert an unanticipated disruption in courses delivered. According to Hodges, et al. (2020), ERT is a temporary shift of course delivery to an alternative delivery mode due to emergency situations as opposed to being experiences that are intentionally planned from the beginning. Although traditional F2F classes were tossed into a state of upheaval across the globe, learning was less disrupted due to two major factors.

To begin with, modern technological infrastructure was already in place and being used, such as learning management systems (LMS) and web conferencing solutions. Therefore, having access to contemporary technology offered robust options when it came time to make the sudden switch from physical classrooms to virtual/remote and/or asynchronous digital classrooms. The circumstances would have been very different if this plague shocked our society even just a few decades before the current timeframe when technological platforms were much less developed.

Secondly, the global health crisis prompted inadvertent mass coercion of faculty and students to shift to the digital realm, more fully utilizing synchronous and asynchronous platforms than ever before, which enabled educational continuity and simultaneously imposed new learning challenges and opportunities through this disruptive innovation. By heavily relying on various technologies, educators and learners were able to see, communicate, and interact with each other without posing health risks and increasing the community spread of the highly infectious coronavirus disease.

When the state of emergency began, it was quickly realized by leadership at most higher education institutions that pivoting classes from physical classrooms to online modalities would be daunting for educators, especially considering the swift turnaround that was required to maintain academic continuity. Though it was uncertain how long the pandemic would endure, leadership at most higher education institutions remained realistic overall and made clear that the need to respond urgently to the unprecedented situation had an emphasis on timely progress over perfection as the primary short-term goal. The outcome was continual learning through disruptive innovation after education professionals reacted and applied ERT methods to finish the spring term in 2020.

Much can be gained through thoughtful reflection and review of lessons that were learned from the big shift to online/remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Notably, the pandemic effects have been felt by students, faculty, and staff at colleges and universities across the country and globe, which were especially amplified for college students. "As a group, college students seem to experience more challenges during the pandemic due to the unique transition time from being at home to being independent individuals away from home" (Xu et al., 2021). In the United States, many campus jobs were paused, creating another layer of hardship for students with a lack of money to buy essentials such as food. Many campuses closed and asked students to leave. These measures, in addition to a lack of timely communication, triggered higher levels of stress, confusion, and fear for college students already amid an unnerving and unprecedented time. There were also a broad range of technological factors that affected students differently, such as internet availability and course content accessibility at their permanent residence.

Post-Pandemic Workplace for Higher Education and the Workforce

Due to the infectious COVID-19 global pandemic unarguably wreaking havoc on the world in catastrophic ways, educators urgently responded to the crises to transition their courses online. Now is the time for stakeholders to thoughtfully reflect on the pandemic impacts regarding higher education services and develop effective strategies to optimize and revolutionize higher education and best prepare students for the workforce. According to a recent research study conducted with 2,574 college students in North America, "sixty percent of students are most concerned about finding a job they enjoy post-graduation" (Wiley, 2024, p. 9).

What are the best aspects that emerged from the recent disruptive innovation? How can we take our collective experiences from the challenging circumstances and turn the many lessons learned from our rapid digitization of ERT efforts into new directions and opportunities to adapt teaching and learning strategies to thrive like never before in the future? "Well-planned online learning experiences are meaningfully different from courses offered online in response to a crisis or disaster" (Hodges et al., 2020). Higher education institutions can leverage the disruptive innovation for good through utilizing this distinctive window of opportunity and using the insights gained to better prepare learners for their future careers.

Embracing Change and Lessons Learned from the Collective Experience

As the world continues to contend with momentous disruptions following the pandemic, uncertainties and opportunities lie ahead for the higher education community and business industry. Overall, society has worked through and moved past the initial feelings of shock and disbelief, embracing changes and lessons learned from the collective experience of The Great Experiment of 2020. There has been a lot of discussion about the world beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and with acknowledgments that many aspects of life have been reshaped. This includes the higher education system, as well as the workplace, being reimagined. "Adoption of online, blended, and hybrid models for course delivery, according to the ebbs and flows of the pandemic, has arguably accelerated the evolution of higher education" (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021, p. 11). Imposed changes during the emergency transition to digital learning allowed most learners to experience online education for the first time.

As suggested by a national study conducted and reported in 2020, perceptions of online education among most traditional college-aged students were relatively negative or non-existent before the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic (Means et al., 2020). The quantitative data collection process for this study took place in the spring of 2020 after the pandemic started. There were 1,008 survey respondents who were traditional college students enrolled in F2F courses and experienced the radical shift to online learning for the latter half of the semester. Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that a high percentage of college students desire a hybrid mix for most of their classes. The benefits of effective communication, as well as a more interactive social component, were noted from survey results regarding F2F class sessions in which many students indicated a desire for increased in-person interactions with peers and professors (Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020).

Similarly, experiences gained on a large scale in the workforce during the pandemic period provided valuable insights for organizations and businesses across the nation and globe on how work can be effectively redesigned and improved. Although some organizations dabbled with hybrid work structures (i.e., time and place) prior to March of 2020, it was on a small scale

compared to the events that unfolded after COVID-19 was declared and most of the world and nation went into 'lockdown' mode with 'shelter in place' emergency order implemented by governments in the modern world. Prior to 2020, most leaders of organizations and higher education institutions resisted remote and hybrid work structures on a large scale. That is, until they were faced with the global health crisis that organically led to The Great Experiment of 2020, which resulted in organizations having to get creative and reformat work structures on a larger magnitude to maintain academic continuity and business continuity. The shift to digital platforms occurred in most industries to keep operations afloat. What occurred from the collective natural experiment was eye-opening; it proved not only that humans in our society are resilient and adaptable in general, but also that they are also extremely capable of learning new digital skill sets at an accelerated pace and under high pressure and stressful conditions. "This is a chance to harness the real momentum for a radical shift in how we work" (Gratton, 2022, p. 2). The experiences and realizations during the COVID-19 pandemic are testaments that positive change can happen swiftly in and across numerous industries for continual improvement and adaptation to better align with each other and to fit the needs of modern society.

Strategies for Creating Impactful and Inclusive Experiences by Design

There are countless benefits of higher education for individuals and society. However, recent claims purport that "college is no longer good at equipping graduates to succeed in an even more complex and bewildering world" (Davidson, 2022, p. 4). To ensure that higher education aligns with the needs of individuals and society today, we must reflect on what went well, and not so well, during the great shift of 2020 while coping with the COVID-19 crisis. Further research would be advantageous to analyze the good and the bad. For example, should the "digital lecture" be kept, and the traditional classroom lecture be abandoned in exchange for more interactive and dynamic learning activities within the physical classroom space? If this example is adopted broadly, perhaps students could benefit from being able to learn the course materials at their own pace, re-watch lecture recordings to reinforce the material, and select from a smorgasbord of learning options that better suit their learning style and preferences.

Furthermore, the time taken to gather in a physical classroom space could provide more meaningful and engaging learning opportunities and empower the students to be partners in their learning journey. By dedicating in-person class time for interactive group activities, such as students teaming up on case studies, etc., the foundation of knowledge can be expanded, and skills can be deepened and reinforced in a learning community environment. This can be done well by leveraging the hybrid course format as well, especially when educators are intentional about designing courses with a well-thought-out, balanced, student-centered approach. By developing a variety of activities and assignments, instructors can create dynamic learning spaces in F2F settings, as well as in the digital realm. "In the learner-content category, students mentioned working on real-world projects and having discussions with structured or guiding questions were the most beneficial" (Martin & Bolliger, 2018, p. 205). Real-world projects also lend themselves well to providing students with experiential learning opportunities that better prepare them for their future careers.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, Charles Eliot and his colleagues were able to redesign higher education, even with society in that timeframe experiencing rapid change and being highly strained in ways that are comparable to today. This reinforces the importance of revisiting history to help inform our present and future well-being. "What would it mean to

redesign higher education for the intellectual space travel students need to thrive in the world we live in now?" (Davidson, 2022, p. 6). We too have the ability and competence to forge through the challenges and restructure the higher educational institutions of America to meet and exceed the needs of present-day society.

Future of Higher Education Scenarios to Prepare Students for Future Work

Undisputedly, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the world in countless ways, including ways in which people learn and work. Historically, educational institutions have not adapted and evolved as quickly as the workforce overall. Certainly, remote and hybrid work was an option for some, and some educators were offering online education to varying degrees, but there was not a broad shift to the digital realm until the pandemic occurred and pushed as many aspects of everyday life online as possible. The world of work is changing. "If we want to take the phrase 'workforce ready' seriously, then we have to understand what is required of today's workforce" (Davidson, 2022, p. 140). Now more than ever, a myriad of opportunities abounds in rethinking and rebuilding educational environments to coincide with the ever-changing occupational landscape.

How can we begin to forecast what the future is going to be like and plan accordingly? For starters, an observable trend is that more and more employers are moving to a hybrid model where employees are expected to hold themselves accountable to produce quality work, sometimes at home and sometimes at the office. When higher education institutions offer hybrid courses, they are providing students with opportunities to practice working and collaborating in a hybrid setting during college which is beneficial to them before they transition to the rapidly changing workforce (Rist, 2023; Whenham, 2021).

Organizations are now beginning to restructure work modalities into differing formats, requiring office, flex-time, and/or hybrid works, for example. Universities have largely returned to face-to-face courses, with additional on-line asynchronous and synchronous courses and hybrid courses. This research seeks to determine students' preferred learning modality. Do traditional-aged Gen-Z college students favor traditional learning formats, or do they prefer hybrid courses that might better prepare them for the workforce?

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study is grounded in a quantitative approach. Survey questions were developed to help inform the research question: Do Gen-Z college students favor traditional learning formats, or do they prefer hybrid courses that might better prepare them for the workforce? Using a convenience sampling method for this quantitative research, survey data was collected from a total of 926 Gen-Z traditional-aged undergraduate college students. These respondents were majoring or minoring in Business and were enrolled in a marketing course at a residential public four-year university in the Spring Semester or Fall Semester of 2023. Of the 926 total survey respondents, over two-thirds (69%) were in their junior or senior year of college at the time in which they participated in this research, and most (78%) were Business majors. According to the quantitative data collected, most of the college students from the quantitative sample of the population indicated that they are not first-generation students (77.5%), meaning that they have at least one parent who earned at least a bachelor's degree from a higher education institution. Slightly over half (51.7%) of the students identified as male (51.7%), with less than

half identifying as female (47.3%). and most of the students (64%) in this study are enrolled in 15-17 credit hours.

An online survey link was posted in a research participation system that undergraduate college students who were enrolled in a marketing course could access and volunteer for various studies to earn a small percentage (4%) of class credit in exchange for their participation. In addition to demographics, students were queried about their ideal format of taking classes, with single-answer response choices ranging from online learning (asynchronous and/or synchronous) to hybrid learning to traditional in-person classes. An additional "other" response option (with a text box to type specific details) was offered to respondents, as well as an "unsure or prefer not to answer" response option (to provide a response option to those who may be neutral on the topic).

After collecting quantitative data from the sample of 926 individuals within the target population, the raw data sets were exported from Qualtrics into Excel, and prepared for analysis using the statistical program, jamovi, a statistical software program, to run descriptive statistics and analyze results on the course delivery format and demographic variables of this sample of the population to better understand perceptions and preferences among today's college students.

A noteworthy consideration regarding the demographic descriptive statistics of this data set is that 78% of the learners were part of the College of Business, with 69% of the research participants being in their junior or senior year of college. The statistical results of this empirical study divulge that most of the undergraduate college students who participated in this research selected hybrid as their ideal course delivery format. Traditional F2F and fully online asynchronous courses are less ideal among this sample of the population.

More specifically, the quantitative research results revealed that 61% of the learners in this sample of the population prefer to take college courses in a hybrid (or hybrid flexible) modality. The second most popular response was F2F, with 25.9% of the research participants indicating their ideal way of taking college courses is completely in person. The least ideal course delivery format reported was online synchronous (2.5%), followed by online asynchronous with only 10.3% of the respondents preferring that format. Table 1 (Appendix) depicts the data of how students reported their ideal way of taking postsecondary courses.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that Generation Z undergraduate college students' perspectives and preferences regarding higher education course delivery have been shifting since the start of the COVID-19 viral global pandemic in March 2020. The respondents have experienced various course delivery modalities over the past few years, ranging from online asynchronous and online synchronous, to face-to-face delivery, to different variations of blended learning (such as hybrid).

When evaluating online education perspectives among the student participants, most gained more positive opinions about taking classes on the computer after March of 2020. The results of this study suggest that Generation Z college students in developed nations may have begun shifting to a more optimistic mindset when it comes to taking classes, at least in part, on the computer.

By acknowledging and understanding the evolving landscape of work in post-pandemic times, there may be a potential silver lining. With a cultural shift in demand for better work-life balance happening on a broad scale (national and global level), the leaders of the collective

higher education system need to recognize that we are amidst a great value-creation opportunity for the higher education sector. A huge social responsibility of higher education is workforce preparedness. Learning how to operate well in flexible environments is part of that responsibility. Industry leaders are redefining and sharing mission-critical values and designing successful hybrid cultures with intentionality. A key component to building and implementing effective hybrid structures is to not only offer people flexibility but also to help individuals feel connected and aligned with the organization's vision and culture (Ekelman & Kantor, 2023). By learning how to work differently, embracing agility and adaptability, and being intentional about rebalancing lives by working smarter and better, the quality of lives for the holistic individual can be improved, and the trickle effect would undoubtedly have positive ramifications for organizations and our broader society.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Continued future research on this topic will be advantageous to keep the education sector and workforce community apprised of societal needs when designing and shaping modern work structures to best meet the needs of current and future college students. Ideally, it would be beneficial for this research to be conducted at higher education institutions across the country and globe to understand this phenomenon more fully. By leveraging data to help inform and implement positive change, higher education institutions can proactively prepare for the future needs of traditional and lifelong learning in the higher education sector and the surrounding communities that are served by colleges and universities.

Further empirical research will continue to help educators and leaders of higher learning institutions to better understand the rapidly changing landscape of higher education and how to best meet the needs of modern society and current and future college students. As suggested by post-pandemic research findings (Means et al., 2020; Rist, 2023; Whenham, 2021; Cooker et al., 2022), numerous Gen Z students have shifted their preferences for college classes to be instructed in a hybrid format. Many of today's postsecondary learners enjoy the convenience, flexibility, and choice offered by online courses, despite some limitations of online education. At the same time, many traditional-aged college students appreciate the various benefits that are derived from some face-to-face interactions during in-person class sessions. Therefore, it is logical that higher education learners across the globe may desire a healthy blend of the two formats.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 global viral pandemic in early 2020 was unpredicted and triggered many unexpected and indirect consequences. After the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, people in society had to quickly pivot and adapt their ways of working and going to school. This resulted in a massive surge in people operating in remote and hybrid conditions. With the urgent need for rapid change, there was a surge in hybrid work experience on a large scale that was vastly different from the norm. This was the first time that most educators and students experienced working in a fully online or hybrid environment. Therefore, educators had to employ digital practices and innovative techniques at an extremely fast pace. An operation of this magnitude has presented various challenges that, in the long run, are also showing to present many opportunities that are expediting the progress of hybrid education.

Hybrid learning increases flexibility and creates opportunities for individuals to establish a healthier work-life balance, whether they are working and/or learning. Students and professionals experiencing different ways of learning and working are beginning to appreciate how flexible remote and blended options can be advantageous. Whether people are in learning mode and/or working mode is becoming more interchangeable than ever before as the increasingly digital world evolves. According to Gratton, "Our experience of digital technologies, which were accelerated during the pandemic, have shaped our and our employees' expectations" (2022, p. 54). A flexible hybrid model is becoming more common, desired, and expected in the workforce, where there is a mix of individuals going into the office on some days and working from home on other days.

The increased presence of hybrid learning in higher education institutions is transforming the pedagogy of traditional teaching and learning practices. Moving forward, intentional planning and thoughtful preparation are needed to integrate the hybrid learning techniques well, while better preparing students for the workforce.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Results of Post-COVID Ideal Course Delivery Format

Ideal-Post-COVID	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
1: Online Asynchronous	95	10.259 %	10.259 %
2: Online Synchronous	23	2.484 %	12.743 %
3: Hybrid (combination of online/F2F)	328	35.421 %	48.164 %
4: Hybrid Flexible (virtual and F2F)	232	25.054 %	73.218 %
5: F2F (100% in person classes)	240	25.918 %	99.136 %
6: Other	3	0.324 %	99.460 %
7: Unsure or prefer not to answer	5	0.540 %	100.000 %