



Cracking the Code:

Engaging Generation Z in the Classroom



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On a scale of 1 to 10, how engaged would you say your students are? If this number is lower than you'd like or lower than you would have given 5 years ago, you aren't alone. A study in Idaho found that only 46% of students were engaged with school in 2021—down from 65% in 2018¹.

While schools try to navigate keeping their curricula up with rapid global changes, it's easy to lose sight of the factor that will attract students and make them stay: engagement.

In order for students to learn, graduate, and succeed in their next step—they need to first connect to the course material and understand how it will help them reach their goals. As an educator, it should be no surprise to you that Generation Z (Gen Z) has a shorter attention span and learns differently than its elder generations.

To help you bridge this gap, we've compiled the top data, expert insights, and teaching methods that will engage students in the classroom.





Bridging the Disconnect Between Traditional Teaching Methods and Gen Z Learning Styles

While both students and teachers agree that students learn best through doing and creating², schools haven't moved quickly enough to catch their curricula up. Rapid acceleration in technology and learning preferences since 2020 has left a gap between how students explore the world outside the classroom—and inside of it.

Just how big is this disconnect? Let's look at the numbers. While students (and teachers) rate reading, writing, and listening as the least effective teaching methods, they also say that they persist as the most common teaching methods they encounter.

8 SECONDS

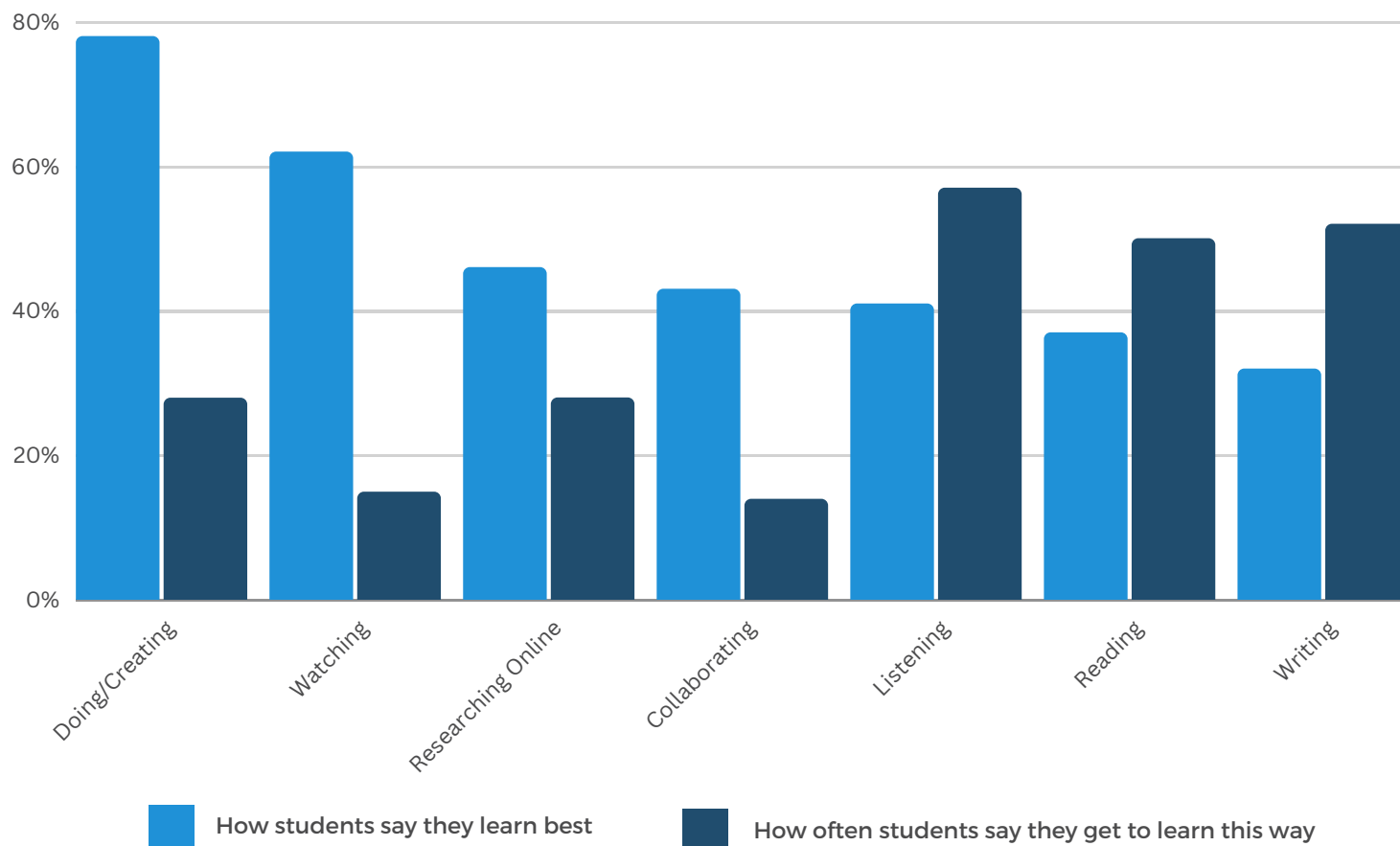
average attention span of Gen Z,
one-third less than Millennials³



75% OF STUDENTS

wish to continue virtual education
in some form after the pandemic⁴

Mind the Gap: The Effectiveness of Popular Classroom Teaching Methods²





Educators have a considerable opportunity to engage students through hands-on learning, video content, and creative and collaborative projects. The stakes are high; disengagement can result in poor learning outcomes, lower student retention, and lagging career preparedness.

To address this problem, teachers and school administrators need to prioritize adapting their teaching methods for Gen Z with new strategies and technology.

Students in lecture-based classroom environments perform 6% lower on exams and are 1.5 times more likely to fail.

Just 54% of Gen Z workers feel their education has successfully prepared them to succeed in 2030.

How to Engage Gen Z in the Classroom

So, how can you effectively engage your students if traditional teaching methods aren't working? Try these six strategies to promote engagement and active learning in your classroom.

1. Break Up Lectures with Short and Engaging Content

Gen Z earned the nickname “the Now Generation” because they’re accustomed to pulling up any information on demand on their phones. Their attention spans are shorter than any previous generation. This poses a challenge to the primary teaching method for the past millennia: the lecture.

Researcher Kimberlee Mendoza, PhD, found that straight lectures are the number-one reason for student disengagement. While students struggle to focus on auditory content for extended periods, they may tune out or use their devices for non-classroom use.

“Gen Z students live in the world of animation and technology. So, if you think you're going to get up and lecture for 20 minutes in front of a group of kids, it's not going to happen,” shares Kenneth Midgett, Interplay Learning Plumbing Market Director and past NHCC Plumbing Instructor of the Year. “You need to break lectures up with animation and technology.”



Try this instead of a full-hour lecture:

- Break up lectures every 10 minutes with a video, discussion, or hands-on activities
- Enhance lectures with visuals like slides or 3D simulations
- Allow students to stand or move around the classroom to meet kinesthetic needs

“This is a kinesthetic generation. 90% of people in my study had some form of kinesthetic need. We’re expecting them to just sit there and listen when they’re not auditory. In fact, everyone I interviewed could not do auditory just by itself.”

-Kimberlee Mendoza, PhD



2. Embrace Technology inside the Classroom

Gen Z is the first generation of truly digital natives—people who can't imagine their life without constant technology. Technology use in the classroom falls into two categories: collective and individual.

Collective technology examples include showing a video, doing a live quiz, or screen-casting a virtual reality simulation for the class. Individual technology use is how students use their personal devices to enhance or engage with what's going on in front of the classroom. While you may have the impression that phone use detracts from the learning environment, that isn't always the case. Students may use their phones for notetaking or for looking up terms they don't understand.

"When you allow students to use their phone or computer in class, you're allowing them to engage in it, as an independent learner and thinker," explains Midgett.

Try this instead of banning phones:

- Set an expectation that phones can only be used for learning, not personal use
- Use videos, online knowledge checks, or interactive quizzes like Kahoot! or EdPuzzle to engage students
- Give assignments or feedback with a video instead of in writing

Engage Students with Video

Gen Z students are the biggest consumers of video content⁷, favoring short-form videos. 40% of Gen Z search for information on video platforms like TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube over Google⁸. Videos bring a trifecta of visual, auditory, and written stimuli together for high engagement and recall.

3. Get Hands-On

Both teachers and students say that doing and creating is the most effective learning method. Hands-on activities are effective because they employ what's called "active learning"—where students participate in the learning process rather than just listening or reading. Learning by doing also activates curiosity and recall in a different way than simply watching or reading.

66%

of teachers say that hands-on learning opportunities would enable them to better prepare Gen Z for the workforce²

So, why isn't this employed more in classes? Resource constraints like classroom space and time and funding for lab equipment and field trips are the primary culprits.

Try this when labs or fields trips aren't possible:

- Use online 3D simulations like Interplay Learning to mimic real-world experiences
- Use virtual reality training to let students interact and explore how theoretical concepts apply in the field
- Assign online simulations as homework to better prepare students for labs and classroom discussions





4. Integrate Collaborative Learning

Another way to engage students where they might struggle alone is to integrate social and collaborative learning into your classrooms. Working with other students gives them new perspectives, peer feedback, and prepares them for environments after graduation.

60%

of students say they would rather work on a project with others than alone₂

Eric Mazur, PhD., Harvard professor and education researcher, describes why collaborative projects are effective. “In team-based learning models, students grapple with challenging problems that they can only solve by working together to learn and apply key class concepts. When this happens, students can learn from and with each other in ways that do not just facilitate content mastery but also foster social skills for future success in an increasingly collaborative world.”

Try these ways to integrate collaborative learning:

- Break students into small groups to discuss course material in the classroom
- Design group projects difficult enough, but still achievable, to foster interdependence
- Communicate clear learning objectives for team-based projects so students understand the skills they're building

5. Embrace Personalized Learning

Research has found that Gen Z students prefer personalized learning, or instruction that can be adjusted to suit their individual learning style and interests. This can include flexible modules, technology, or assignments that students can adapt to their strengths, needs, and interests.

Personalized learning is effective for several reasons. First, it avoids disengagement experienced by students who are ahead or behind the average learning curve. When students can advance to more difficult material or repeat practice for concepts they're struggling with, they hold their interest. Second, customizable assignments can allow students to engage with topics they're passionate about. For example, you could ask students to give presentations or create videos about a topic of their choosing.

Try this:

- Allow students to customize projects and assignments to topics that interest them
- Create a selection of learning activities that students can choose from, with equal grade values
- Adopt self-paced modules that allow advanced students to move ahead or struggling students to complete unlimited practice
- Use online skills assessments to determine knowledge gaps and assign customized learning paths to fill those gaps

89%

of Gen Z students say they like learning products that can be personalized₂



6. Connect the Why

Gen Z students are excited to reach the next step in their lives—whether that's going to college or getting their first job—but may not have much patience for the learning process they need to get there.

To combat this, work to connect every learning objective to skills students will use for the rest of their lives. “Everything you teach that's not a technical skill needs to be relatable,” advises Midgett. While teaching the Pythagorean theorem in CTE plumbing classes, for instance, he found that he needed to connect the dots with direct applications in offsets and piping to keep students engaged.

“Gen Z students want to learn, you just have to give them the path. One of the best things that you can do as a teacher is to show that young learner the trajectory of their career path.”

- Kenneth Midgett

Try this:

- Project a 3D simulation in front of the class, then pause at various points and ask, ‘What will happen if I do X?’ Dialogue about how course material relates to work in the field or in the workforce
- Cast VR simulations on a screen and let students watch, learn and ask questions as a fellow student performs a simulation in VR

Interactive Learning Exercises to Try in Your Classes

Pivoting from traditional learning methods to interactive and student-led learning methods can be daunting. Like all change, adjusting your instructional methods can be humbling—but it's worth the investment.

“If you aren't currently using interactive technology in the classroom, I think that first thing you have to do is realize that this is the better way to do it,” says Midgett. “Recognize that you need to change your game and be willing to be adaptive. If you're if you don't have a program or a teaching environment that's heavily embedded with technology, you need to get there.”

To adapt your instructional methods, read the latest research, attend technology conferences, and speak to peers about how they're using technology in the classroom. Now that you're familiar with the theory behind what works to engage students, here are practical exercises you can pilot in your classroom to heighten engagement.





1. Flip Your Classroom with Pre-Work

Classroom time is a premium. Assigning pre-work for class can help you optimize your in-person learning time by facilitating interactive or student-led learning during class. Here are a few examples of pre-work in practice:

Assign Pre-Work for Foundational Concepts

- **Before class:** Assign students to watch video-based content to introduce them to foundational curriculum concepts.
- **During class:** Break students into small groups and give them discussion questions or group projects to complete collectively.

Prepare for Lab Days in Trade Schools

- **Before class:** In a CTE environment, assign simulations specific to lab activities to prepare students for upcoming work on real equipment.
- **During class:** Since students have already practiced the lab activity multiple times (and instructors can verify completion), you can skip the demonstration and progress straight into the practice. This allows you to accelerate through the content at a faster rate.

2. Motivate Students with Gamification

Assign points for assignments

Point scoring is a great way to incentivize students to complete assignments. When you use an online learning system like SkillMill, you can assign point values to milestones such as training simulations, knowledge checks, videos, or assessments. Seeing their progress each time they log in will give students a sense of accomplishment and motivation to keep going.

Create a virtual leaderboard

Once individual points are tracked in a system, you can also create a team leaderboard showing who has earned the most points that week or semester. Peer comparison creates a sense of competition and motivation. You can even offer prizes for leaders.

3. Practice, Practice, Practice

Practicing technical skills helps CTE students develop their skills in a safe environment with the reinforcement of repetition. Aside from individual practice, try integrating practice into the classroom with simulations.

First, organize students into smaller groups and screen-cast a 3D or VR simulation on a laptop or display. Allow students to practice one at a time with the group, taking turns collectively troubleshooting and diagnosing on virtual equipment.

4. Give Immediate Feedback

Another trait of the “Now Generation” is craving immediate feedback on their work. Instant feedback can enhance learning outcomes by avoiding a disconnect when there’s a feedback delay. On your own, you can’t spend 1:1 time every class giving each student feedback. However, there are other ways to give quick individualized feedback at scale.

Peer-to-peer debriefs

After a simulation or project presentation, ask students to break into partners or small groups and to debrief each other’s work. This method builds communication skills and lets students problem-solve collaboratively.

Assessment technology

With individual assessment technology, you can give immediate feedback at scale by building knowledge checks into your modules. Ensure that your students can recall course materials with evaluations like SkillMill’s Assessments and Challenge Mode Simulations.



The Benefits of Interactive Learning

As educators and students re-imagine the classroom of tomorrow, it's clear that this transformation is not just about following flashy trends. Interactive technology can benefit your outcomes across the board.

- **Reduce costs** with savings on lab equipment and consumable materials
- **Increase safety** in trades programs by allowing students unlimited practice before fieldwork
- **Cover more curriculum** in less time with pre-work and individual practice
- **Boost student enrollment**, engagement, and retention

The Next Generation of Technology for Today's Classrooms

Interested in learning about tools that can help you incorporate these strategies into your classrooms? To launch a program using interactive technology, you need the right software. And if you're part of 80% of schools preparing to purchase additional technology for students, you know that choosing the right one is crucial.

What to look for in a technology platform

- Brings field-like training to your CTE or trade program with cutting-edge 3D simulations and virtual reality
- Gives students unlimited, self-paced practice for best outcomes
- Offers assessments and knowledge checks for feedback and retention
- Motivates students with gamification
- Integrates with your current curriculum and LMS

75% of teachers say they need better tools to help prepare Gen Z for the workforce₂

For a technology solution that meets all of these and more, explore SkillMill by Interplay Learning. SkillMill is an interactive, simulation-based training platform designed for Gen Z learners. With bite-sized learning videos and immersive 3D simulations, these courses grab students' attention while also providing a personalized, technology-based learning journey.

To learn more or take a product tour, contact us at sales@interplaylearning.com.

"SkillMill was night and day— it was a game changer to use this in a classroom environment because of the power of it."

- Kenneth Midgett





Appendix

1. <https://www.idahoednews.org/news/student-engagement-drops-again-during-the-pandemic/>
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Ready to transform your classroom? Contact our team to get started.

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