Developing a Learner-Centered Syllabus for Diverse Classes: Generations Z and Y

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Abstract:
Learner-centered syllabus presents an opportunity for promoting the students' sense of ownership of the learning experience. A growing amount of research is emerging about the importance of a learner-centered syllabus in generating a powerful learning environment capable of fostering critical thinking, intellectual involvement, and mutual trust. To try to see and understand the course from the student's perspective is one of the varying approaches to the course syllabus design. Accordingly, in "the gold standard reference", The Course Syllabus: A Learning-Centered Approach, O'Brien, Mills, and Cohen have displayed a set methods and research findings on how to create a learning-centered syllabus. Based on this practical handbook, the present work examines syllabus construction from the teacher's perspective with an essential consideration of the students' age ranges, learning styles, and needs. The primary aim of this research is to study the different learning experiences of the latest groups to enter university, "Millennials Versus Generation Z" for evaluating the two generations' learner-centeredness and the development of a course syllabi that work for both age groups.
Keywords: Course syllabus development; Learning-Centered Approach; Generations Z and Y learning styles

1. INTRODUCTION:

In the past few decades, higher education has encountered impressive and imposing changes that led to substantial leaps in the adopted pedagogical methods, educational materials, and instructional settings. These effects play a major role in the continuous development of educational system that prioritizes students' merits. As a crucial part of educational system, university freshmen are, metaphorically, to decide and dictate how and what to study, the matter that requires a prerequisite knowledge of the learning style and generation that teachers are to handle. Again, defining the students' needs, wants, and styles through studying and understanding their generation is a determining factor in this whole process.

A learner's age is one of the most critical predictors of differences in measuring the cognitive and affective skills. As teachers, we are supposed to study our students' different ages and the generation they belong to, so that we

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can easily highlight what really works and doesn't work for a better educational experience. Accordingly, teaching strategies of university instructors are subjected to ceaseless questions on how to improve and upgrade the quality of scholarship. At this point, we can say that one of the very first aspects to be considered for promising results in the iterative process of honing academic plan of action is through a generational scrutiny that would begin from syllabus design and development.

2. Advantages of Learning-Centeredness in Course Syllabus

Course syllabus is often the initial step through which the student get to discover the nature of the subject, content coverage, and the class procedures. This critical document encompasses not only the content of the course, but includes also descriptions of class logistics, requirements of student tasks, continuous evaluation, and grading criteria (Richmond et al., 2014). Therefore, the syllabus works as an essential academic blueprint that communicates an expectation of student engagement and learning outcomes. Subsequently, more attention has been given to the ultimate features of student inclusive syllabus that would develop student-learning engagement, their responsibilities within the classroom, and the context within which those elements will merge. Such syllabi are meant to be learner-centered (e.g., O'Brian, Millis, & Cohen, 2008; Richmond, 2016). According to Diamond (1997),

> A learner-centered syllabus requires that you shift from what you, the instructor, are going to cover in your course to a concern for what information and tools you can provide for your students to promote learning and intellectual development. (p. xi)

Actually, learner-centeredness begins with a syllabus that is meant to guide the student through the learning process. The syllabus design, as a matter of fact, should meet certain criteria, and is supposed to have a broad vision that incorporates course objectives, goals, the adopted methods, classroom rules and expectations, assignments, evaluation, and assessment. Eventually, the more information students have regarding the learning experience, the more likely it is that they will succeed.

Learner-centeredness in the construction of course syllabus is an approach that will help the teacher to be in control of what and how to teach and will simultaneously enable him/her to assess learner-centeredness. Cullen and Harris best explain a learner-centered syllabus as "an attempt to create community, a sharing of power and control over what is learned and how it is learned as well as a focus on assessment and evaluation tied directly to learning outcomes" (p. 117). Besides the possibility of assessing the learning outcomes, this kind of syllabus have several positive results on the students learning (e.g. DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005; Richmond et al., 2014).

Recent research suggests that the development of learner-centered syllabi empowers both the teachers and students, in addition to a remarkable increase in the course interest. Teachers, in this respect, are viewed to possess exemplary teaching features like flexibility and being at ease yet in control. The students, however, feel empowered and can remember more, as they are fully involved and engaged in this kind of contractual syllabus (Richmond et al., 2014; Saville et al., 2010). Noticeably, there is a growing body of research and practice that recommends the use of learner-centered syllabi that proved to be efficient (e.g. Richmond et al., 2014; Saville, Zinn Brown, & Marchuk, 2010). However, the question that arises in this context is how to develop a learner-centered syllabus?

In a learning-centered environment, teachers/professors/tutors are responsible for providing their students with the metacognitive supports that must include necessary materials and strategies. Students, nevertheless, can take active part in this process with the cognition of their learning strategies as a method for improving the learning process and the learning results (Popenici & Kerr, 2017). This can perfectly demonstrated through learner-centered syllabus, which can be an essential learning tool for both the teacher and the students in and out of class, face-to-face, and online (O'Brian, Millis, & Cohen 2008). In three simple steps, Bain (2004) summarizes how to create a "promising syllabus":

> Trust, rejection of power, and setting standards that represented authentic goals rather than schoolwork are apparent in the … [promising] syllabus the best teachers tended to use … First, the instructor would lay out the promises or opportunities that the course offered to students … Second, the teacher would explain what the students would be doing to realize those promises, … Third, the syllabus summarized how the instructor and the students would understand the nature and the progress of the learning. (pp. 74 – 75)

Accordingly, in designing a learning-centered syllabus one must consider designing a purposeful environment of collaboration, effectiveness, and efficiency. This atmosphere manifests itself through communicating high expectations, encouraging teacher/student contact, developing reciprocity and cooperation among students, using active learning strategies, offering rapid feedback, and ensuring purposeful assessment. This can be achieved through an in-depth learning approach that necessitates the focus on the intentions, roles, attitudes, and strategies.

In their learning-centered syllabus guide, O'Brien, Mills, and Cohen (2004) provide an overview of the process that leads to developing an effective syllabus. Consideration of the increasing diversity of the student body and the students' pre-university experience are to determine the very nature of the composed syllabus. Hence, a carefully designed syllabus is a crucial step to overcoming these attitudes. The content and process in a learner-centered syllabus must

therefore be demonstrated in such a format that best conform to the generational diverse university students.

3. Learner-Centered Syllabus Design

For a slight modification of an already existing syllabus, Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) suggest that the process of improving the syllabus requires the consideration of checking it for bias. As a first step, the teacher should scrutinize the syllabus for a succinct modification that would lead to a relative course renovation, which would eventually reflect the nature and the objectives of the syllabus at hand. Such minor consideration can profoundly affect the students' expectations and predictions of what to learn, as well as their academic, intellectual, and cultural responses to the given course.

As a very crucial step, the rationale is certainly the most important brick in the course syllabus construction. Educators, teachers, and syllabus developers should create a well-grounded rationale for the course on which the whole structure is going to stand. Moreover, the beliefs, values, the implicit assumptions are the soul of the course syllabus that would definitely influence the whole aspects of the course. A good and well-developed rationale is, according to Shulman (2004), "a set of critically examined core assumptions about why you do what you do in the way that you do it", which will give us deep thoughts on what and how to include in the course. Shulman has additionally contended that while contemplating over teaching, we can add here contemplating our course syllabus, is an act of scholarship. Guidelines on this matter are summarized in Shulman's "Scholarly Reflection about Teaching".

In course design, however, the teacher must start from the scratch and with the end in mind. That is to say, the syllabi is the blueprint of the course for both the teacher and the students. For this reason, the syllabi creator should consider the overall objective(s) of the course, the underlying assessment/evaluation practices, and how/what tools are to be adopted for optimizing the students' understanding and engagement. On this line of reasoning, Wiggins and McTighe (2005) urged for three essential steps in the process of developing a learner-centered syllabi. Step 1 is to focus on what are the most important things that the student must take away from the course. Step 2 is to think of various forms of assessment and evaluation both formal and informal, in class and as assignments. In the last stage, however, the creator should focus on the learning experiences that would promote understanding, interest, and excellence.
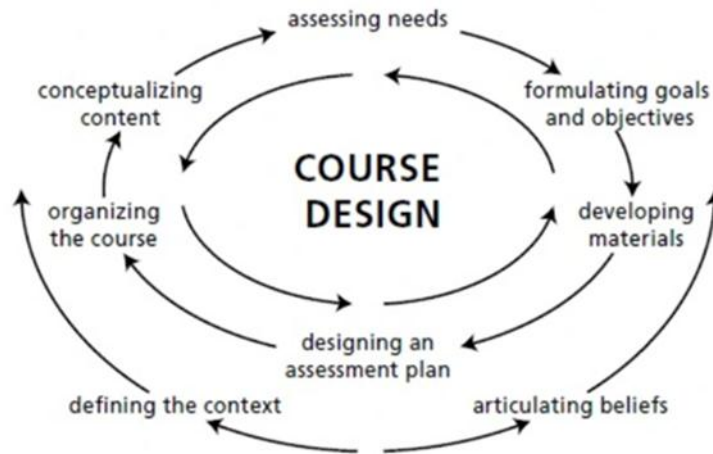
Figure 1. Graves' Model of Curriculum Development (Graves, 2000, p.4)

4. Exploring Generational Learning Preferences

Following this line, there must be a consideration for a class where we could find a good number of the millennial students together with Z Gen students who constitute the majority university students today. As a case in point, Master level is an optimal choice as it displays the possibility of the enrollment of older people who want to pursue their studies for obtaining their Master degrees. As instructors/ teachers, in this respect, we must design syllabus that are essentially learner-centered because the students of second academic degree are mature and educated enough for being part of the teaching and learning experiences. It is widely known that Master students are acquainted with the basics of research skills. They know their learning styles and learning needs, and they need, as future teachers, to be part of the teaching process. For syllabus design, however, age disparity causes a crucial problem for the teachers as they are supposed to find out the differing learning styles, their preferred learning methods, and assessing practices that would work for two distinct age ranges.

4.1. The Learning Styles of Millennial Gen

The Net Generation, as it is also known, is a generation that born 1981 – 1999 (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002), and have been raised during 1.0 and 2.0 Web eras. This generational is also referred to as Generation Y because it comes after Generation X (The publication Ad Age was one of the first to coin the term "Generation Y," in an editorial in August 1993.). Accordingly, Millennial Gen is a computer literate generation that shows a growing interest in the different usages of multi-media, the thing that is widely observed in the different spheres including at school. The millennial learners are, hence, resilient and could easily adopt to the transformational goals of today's higher education.

Unlike their very early educational experience, the Millenials are privileged over all other generations with the witness of two different learning methods, the

traditional and the modern, which advances the use of internet-based methods and tools. The two different environments of this technologically enhanced generation will be an integral part of embracing the old way and embarking on a new learning journey. The term Millennial has initially appeared in William Strauss and Neil's book "Millennial Rising: The Next Great Generation". Their educational and social experiences have been under surveillance. They have had less free time than any other generation as they mostly shifted from supervision at different the differing educational institutions to adult supervised activities (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

In learning, the Millenials are described as the group age that is technologically fluent (Lewis, 2003). Besides being noticeably experimental, engaging, and interactive (Skiba, 2006), the Millenials are self-imposing and creative, they "will want to be able to work quickly and creatively, and they want to do it their way" (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000, p. 143). Another distinguished feature for this generation is that they are good at multitasking, "Many young people today are accustomed to watching TV, talking on the phone, doing homework, eating, and interacting with their parents all at the same time" (Frand, 2000). This behavior raises concerns about this generation's learning feedback and outcomes that may result in shortening their attention span and would eventually drain their focus and their ability on thinking critically and creatively (Murray, 1997). Notwithstanding, this generational cohort is potentially good at using media, which could be very beneficial for their learning. The director for digital media, learning and education, Constance Yowell, comments on that, "young people are way ahead of the adults in understanding how to use these tools" (Trei, 2006, p.2).

4.2. Learning Styles of Z Generation

The generation that is currently studying at university is Generation Z. This generation has its own learning preferences and educational orientations that differentiate it from the millennial generation. Generation Z is a reference to children who were born between the late 1995 and early 2012 (Aged between 12-25). The members of this generation are also known as zoomers, a term that is used to mockingly describe active baby boomers who are noticeably active and vibrant. Growing up in modern technology environment, Facebook generation is more tech-savvy and highly connected to the technological evolution and digitalization. Unlike the millenials that were likely to learn digital skills and to unlearn technology-free activities, Gen Zers were born and raised with online and social media that have opened up the world for them and have granted them unlimited advantages over prior generations.

In this respect, the digital abilities is part of Z Gen lifestyle that should be incorporated in every aspect of their educational journey. They are identified with a great passion for the natural use of technology that is characterized by

speed, efficiency, and preference of e-learning (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The tendency of using the internet as an educational means has generated an array of qualities that are manifested most of all in auto-didactic learning, intellectual self-confidence, and learner centeredness. That brings the statement of E. Bohn for the learning concept to the forefront: "Learning is the evolution of knowledge over time". In relation to Bohn's statement, learning is the evolution of knowledge, and the evolution of knowledge on how to help the students better learn should be of high importance for instructors.

5. Blurring the Lines Between the two Generational Cohorts

In our universities, there is a great need for considering our students' disparities in their learning styles and needs. University Professors, for that matter, should think of the possible innovative ways, tools, and methods for establishing an educational environment that gives wide opportunities with the clear objective of facilitating the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. It is with the development of an effective and efficient course syllabus that we can guarantee the follow up of fostering pedagogical elements that involve knowledge acquisition, performance, interaction, motivation, and collaboration, which would help our students to reach excellence. In order to achieve that goal we need to look at the very same learning features of the two groups so that we can develop a syllabus that work for the two categories of students.

The learning features of the Millenials is not different from the preceding generation. Both cohorts are good users of technology, the matter that should be examined and included in in our courses. In regards to their use of web services and technological devices, Shatto and Erwin (2016, p.6), claim that the Z's have easy access to streaming services so they can be connected and watch at their convenience on a multitude of devices. The use of the smartphone, for instance, is highly used by the two generations, with varying degrees, the fact that led to their inability of analyzing and critically understanding the ideas and information they perceive. Consequently, the Y's and Z's excessive use of technology results in shortening their attention span and focus. Unsurprisingly, the millenials spend an average of about 3.7 hours per day on personal cell phones, with 4.5 hours on social media daily. Generation Z on the other side, dominate their precursors in smartphone usage and screen time with 9 hours a day (Shatto and Erwin). According to a 2018 Pew Research study, 95% of teens age 13 to 17 reported having a smartphone, and 45% reported they are online constantly (Joung 2020).

Inevitably, educators and teachers are emergently required to change their traditional instructional approach to suit 8 seconds long span attention. With unquestionable use of smart devices, the two categories of the learners can feel comfortable, effective, and in control of not only what to learn, but how to learn. In accordance with their learning preferences, Shatto and Erwin suggest some

practical teaching tips that would be of similar effectiveness to course syllabus development:

- Use mobile technology when possible. An example of this might be the use of hypertext, an internet-based approach that must be included while creating the syllabus. If we consider uploading our student-centered syllabus in one of the educational platforms, Moodle for instance, the students will use it as a hypertext. The use of hypertext documents through World Wide Web browsers, which is extensively used nowadays, offer an array of advantages for students and teachers.

- Use assignments that can be completed on tablets or phones. A case in point might be the use of Google Forms, where the students do their assignments at home by filling and sending the form. Thus, teachers are going to save time and effort, and ensure the student's enjoyment of this learning process.

- Encourage collaboration using technology. Communicative competency, for instance, could be fostered using social media like Facebook, in order to improve their spoken and written skills. The use of Facebook as a learning management system (LMS) during a course can have numerous advantages like instant messaging and having discussions, besides sharing course materials, opportunity to upload files, etc.

- Reinforce concepts with YouTube videos. The very nature of videos, which maintains both the visual and the auditory features, allows for more efficient information processing and memory recall. Educational or instructional short videos are both compelling and engaging for learners. We should also consider the differences in watching video content, Z Gen, for example, spends hours watching videos on social platforms like YouTube and Facebook. Y Gen, however, only watch videos when they need specific information.

All of the above-suggested practical teaching tips using a variety of devices and internet-based tasks are to be incorporated throughout the development of learner-centered syllabus. Together with the content and the integration of hands-on experiences in the classroom, the teacher should have all the preliminary digital and internet-based tools, used both in the classroom and at home, that would be in convenience with both generational cohorts and their learning styles and needs.

Since Y and Z require teaching and learning process that suits their learning preferences, attention span is one of the critical commonly shared treat among the millenials and the Gen Zers. In this respect, Hallowell & Ratery (2011, p.28), refer to the short attention span that affects both Y and Z as "acquired attention deficit disorder" because their brains are now wired to comprehend complex visual images. Subsequently, teachers should focus their attention on the use of visual approach that would focus on visual aids animations and video clips with which they can interact. As instructors, we should give a prior importance to

what our students expect from the delivered course. After all, the main objective of the course syllabus is not just what to teach, but how teach content to a varying age groups, differing interests, and dissimilar learning styles.

6. Developing a Learning-Centered Syllabus for the Two Youngest Groups

Again, it is with setting up a thoughtful set of the class protocols, the main course ingredients, and the assessment/evaluation arranged practices that students with different backgrounds and leaning styles would get a clear vision on how to get on track with their learning experience. The students at this level do not perceive the teacher as the manager of the classroom but as a partner. Moreover, the students with such well-planned courses would feel empowered and in control of their learning that must be relevant to their future. Being actively engaged with a learner-centered course, however, will give them a comprehensive approach to learning and thinking critically.

As indicated above, developing a learning-centered syllabus is an important step towards the construction of a better educational environment for our students. Moving from course design to developing and composing learner-centered syllabi, educators should initially have a well-developed rationale that gather all of the assumptions, objectives, and materials needed to that purpose. The preceding process is to determine what skills, knowledge, attitudes, and value you believe are of most importance, and how they might be incorporated into the course together with the convenient assessment practices. Eventually, this whole operation must be wrapped up with creating an environment that would merge the use of digital devices and virtual learning with face-to face teaching with a wide variety of teaching and learning strategies that are consistent with those beliefs. As a final step, we need to develop and compose a learner-centered syllabus that will communicate our expectations and intentions to students with two technoid age groups.
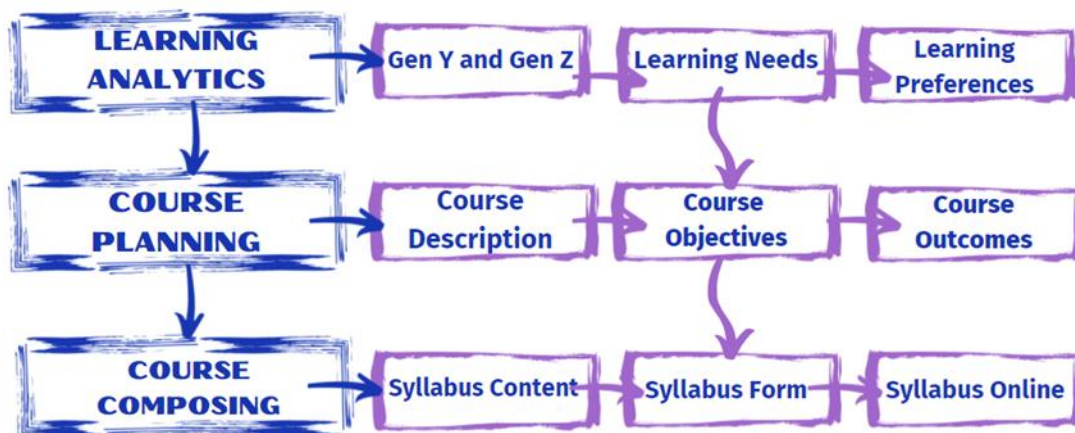
Figure 2. From Planning to Composing a Learning-Centered Syllabus
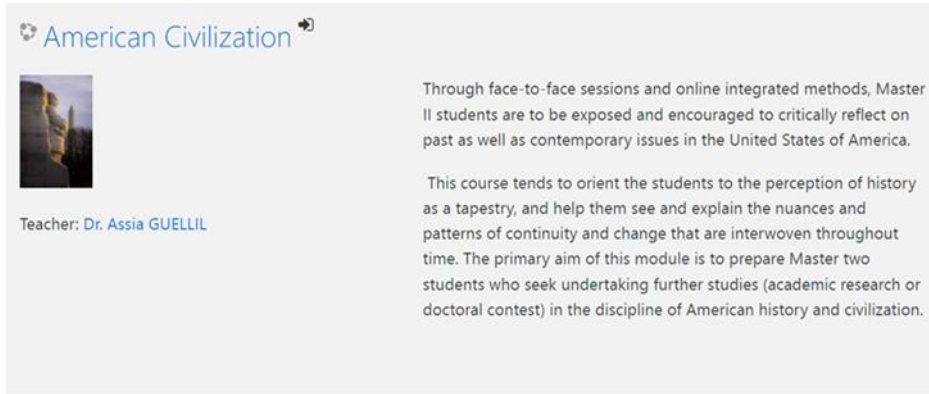(Authors' design)

Once our well-developed rationale, objectives, and outcomes are clearly set as mentioned earlier, we will start thinking of the possible new ways of introducing these ideas to our students. O'Brian, Millis, & Cohen (2008) are suggesting some possible ways on how to form and present the developed. In this section, we will select the most effective and efficient ways on how to display our final product for the youngest generation groups studying at university.

6.1. Syllabus Form

This final step of presenting the content and details of the syllabus should be given a high importance, as it is what the students are supposed to read first. How to form learner-centered syllabus should consider each and every section of the syllabus, the way we display the different sections, together with the length of the this eminent reference document. O'Brian, Millis, & Cohen put this beautifully,

When you lay out your syllabus, remember that it is a reference document that is often read section by section. Instructors handle this in different ways: with emphatic headings, mechanical breaks, or other spatial arrangements that clearly demarcate material and make the readings, grading policy, schedule, and so forth easy for students to read and locate. Some instructors include icons, clip art, or photos to add interest and serve as easy reference points. Increasingly, campus centers for teaching and learning provide formats and templates for developing a syllabus. At some campuses, academic leaders, including deans and chairs, are weighing in on what belongs in a syllabus. (p. 22)

Our first thoughts on how to form the final planned syllabus should be given to the preferred format for the students in accordance to the establishment recommendations. As this syllabus is essentially student-based, we should try to see this eminent script from their perspective to ensure grabbing their attention. As we consider the syllabus format, we should include the course details as course name, nature, and the teacher in charge of the course. It is compulsory to include the rationale of the course, this can be done through the inclusion of both course description and course objectives, which would display a brief overview of what the course will cover and what the student should understand or be able to do throughout this course. Figure 3 is an example of learner-centered that portrays very short description of the course details, description, and objectives.

Figure 3. Course Description and Objectives Displayed on Moodle

6.2. Syllabus Online

Instead of "handing out printouts" of the course syllabus only, we must think of uploading the syllabus to a course management site or any other kind of learning management system. As the development of this kind of personal document is based on learner-centered approach and the learning analytics of two generational cohorts, it is of highly importance to think of ultimate ways that the differing age groups will take full advantage of. We should also think of this document as a contract that is reviewed carefully by the students and other consultants, besides being a dynamic and frequently used learning tool.

Placing course material online would allow the students and the administration to take advantage of the hypertext environment. This web-based document is considered a hypertext resource, where all Web documents are created using hypertext mark-up language (HTML), which would add another internet-based educational material to the Millennials and Z generation that would enable them a quick access and instant verification (pp. 22-23). In regards to the two generations under study, we have notices that the learners' technological skills and competencies are different to some extent. Consideration of the different learning styles in uploading our learner-centered course syllabus that might include visual and hearing impairments.

7. Conclusion

A number of essential instructional steps and procedures related to designing and developing a learner-centered course syllabus for both youngest generations, Millenials and Gen Zers, have been shared in this paper. We have noticed that the generation gap between the two age groups is relatively wide compared to the differences in their learning preferences. The two groups do not share much disparity in the preferred learning styles, used tools and materials as the two cohorts lean towards the use of cyberspace in their education and learning. On this point, researches have predicted that the generational spans are likely to decrease from the traditional 15 to 20 years, as the case for Y and Z, to

5 to 10 years; and that is due to the rapid technological change or what is known as Accelerating Change Theory.

As education is moving onwards online, educators/instructors /teachers/professors, need to adapt to physical and virtual educational environments that must be detached form the ingrained traditional model of teaching in order to keep up with the current advances in education. (Jaleniauskiene and Juceviciene, 2015). That could be proceeded through a consideration of what might be learner-centered, besides opting for pedagogy and the technology that enables online learning for two technology fluent generations. The upcoming generation is expected to be much more technoid and very skilled in IT. Yowell asks "in 10 to 15 years, will kids coming into public education be thinking, behaving or acting differently, or expecting different things because they've been engaged in digital media?" (Trei, 2006, p.1). According to the foundation's statistics, Generation Alpha that comes after Gen Z (from 2010 to 2024), will be, as nearly seventy-five percent of young people use instant messaging and eighty-three percent play video games (Trei, 2006) a prospection that urge for immediate changed attitudes towards learning, which requires continuous innovative pro-technology and pro-internet teaching methods.

Preparing the Millenials and Gen z, and getting prepared for Generation Alpha, requires and urges for modern educational environment that ensure advanced teaching methods that will benefit the student, meet his learning needs, and satisfy his learning preferences. This generational division is due to the rapid changes in technology over the last decades. The teaching methods, however, are not moving at the same pace as this rapid change that is altering people`s lives at various levels. An ultimate result of this is educators are uncomfortable with the use of technology, which will make students suffer.

A thorough consideration of a professional development of course syllabus is a necessary and an essential step towards a proper preparation for the different generation of students, where students are actively engaged with technology-based content. This way, inventive educational content creators will have the privilege to build a successful student-centered educational environment.

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