

Global Engagement in an Interconnected World

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Introduction

A mother sits with her son at a computer. Music fills the room as stylishly dressed kids dance on a computer screen. The scene is a house in the Western African country of Senegal where an encouraging mother is watching a music video with her son and offering her opinion of her son's favorite new musical group, Rania. The group is from South Korea and is part of a music phenomenon called Korean Pop (or K-Pop) that fuses electronic, hip hop, rock and R&B musical forms. The young man made a video of his mother's opinion of the group and put it on YouTube. A South Korean musical group, singing music online that emerged in black American culture, is being shared by an African boy on a global commercial video sharing network. How did we get to this point and what are the implications of this interconnected and overlapping world for this young man's future and the future of young people in the United States?

A certain vision of the future is already here, although unevenly represented around the world. This future is cross-cultural and supported by a global economic system of multinational interests delivered through a decentralized communications network. Young people today are growing up in an interconnected world with access to information through a wide variety of mediums and devices that support the exchange of ideas and opinions. Given that these systems for communication are in constant flux and are being rapidly developed, children must prepare for a future that will look different than the world of their parents.

Trends in Youth Global Engagement

There are six trends that will shape the global engagement of Generation Z over the next decade. Each of them is outlined below, followed by recommendations for how North Carolina should prepare young people for the future.

Trend #1 – The Emergence of an Online Global Identity

Online social networks connect people and create avenues for extending our identity. Identity is connected to our physical being, but increasingly young people are crafting online identities using social networks. Manuel Castells describes this phenomenon in his recent trilogy *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Castells argues that the organization of global economics, political and social institutions prompts individuals to create meaning in their lives through collective action. This explains why networks such as Facebook have become so popular (500 million active users), so fast (Facebook went online just seven years ago in 2004). The attraction of Facebook is the human interaction and collective action that it facilitates. The technology is much less important than the human activities that the technologies enable. In fact, actual interfaces such as Facebook come and go rather quickly (e.g. AOL and MySpace, both with explosive growth and quick declines). These global networks allow people to be free of their "other" identities - their nationalities, their race, and perhaps even their gender. While technology prompts new or extended online global identities, Sherry Turkle warns in her recent book *Alone Together* that our online social identities can be quite shallow and in her estimation these interactions are inadequate as a substitute for physical interaction.

Implications for Generation Z

Generation Z should be prepared to manage their online global identities with the same care as their personal physical identity. Teachers and employers can leverage online social networks to narrow the differences that exist between people from different backgrounds. A new “closeness” among people with different perspectives and ideas may lead to a better understanding of problems and conditions facing the human condition.

Trend #2. Global Media as Shared Content and Experience

Media is increasingly public. We no longer have to rely on a small number of newspapers, television networks and production companies to get information. Today, we are awash in information from decentralized sources such as blogs, wikis, and social networking sites. Information, in the words of Internet pioneer Stewart Brand, wants to be free. We might extend that idea to say that information also wants to be shared and talked about. The low cost of information has resulted in an explosion of content, and open networks make it increasingly easy to share and comment. Networks and the content being shared have permeated everywhere and are facilitated on handheld devices that speed the delivery of content and change the relationship between the viewer and what is viewed. These new forms of global media influence how we make meaning from content and experiences.

Implications for Generation Z

Generation Z must develop the skills to effectively and meaningfully produce, view and critique content. Young people today are now producers, viewers and critics of each other’s work. The cross over between producing and consuming content is as relevant today as it was when Marshal McLuhan introduced the idea of a “prosumer” (producer-consumer) 40 years ago. Generation Z must not only blend the production and consumption of content, but must now manage the experiences of sharing and interacting about that content on global information networks.

Trend #3. Cross-Cultural Learning

The content shared on a global platform means that Generation Z experiences cross-cultural contexts for living and learning. The notion that cultures cross one another is evident in history from the eclectic cultural *mélange* of ancient trading cities to the multicultural metropolitan urban centers of the 19th and 20th century. What’s different today is that these cultural crossings reach into all corners of the world, not just traditional urban centers. Mass culture, capitalism and the Internet bring different ideas and products from all over to all over. Richard Slimbach describes this as a transcultural era characterized by interconnected local, regional and national economies and by the dramatic expansion of travel, telecommunications, tourism and student exchanges. The implications are that humans will increasingly recognize that they share a cultural identity. As such, learning will demand that we articulate our commonalities while also understanding our unique perspectives. Such cross-cultural dispositions require that we interact with one another and seek out commonalities as we engage new ideas.

Implications for Generation Z

Learning for Generation Z will increasingly become a cross-cultural experience. It is no longer possible to isolate learning experiences within the boundaries of homogeneous cultural norms. However, humans still have their unique cultural mooring. Within these unique cultural contexts, Generation Z must seek out a variety of cultural experiences and knowledge to be successful in life. This may include travel, study abroad, intercultural exchange, and sharing of ideas, but also the critiquing of ideas, traditions and values and the ability to clearly articulate one’s own beliefs and values.

Trend #4. Meaningful and Adaptive Global Engagement

The concept of engagement is complex. In his book *Finding Flow*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi suggests that

meaningful engagement asks that we make a commitment to challenging tasks that go beyond the mundane chores that occupy us. These sorts of activities are typical of global engagement. In such contexts, we are asked to understand some idea or perspective that is different than what we believe. In global engagements, we are very often confronted with differences. However, as these engagements increase, our temperament changes and we become more receptive to new ideas. Access to each other (through travel, communications and media) as well as access to information about each other means that young people have regular opportunities to move outside their “zone of comfort” to new situations. The easier it becomes to access ideas from around the world, the more adaptive we will need to be toward different ways of thinking. Young people today are confronted with new ideas, customs, traditions and ways of thinking that are different from their own and thus they must develop skills to make meaningful engagements. Philosopher Kwame Appiah calls this adaptive condition cosmopolitanism and offers some specific ways to address the questions that are prompting globalization. Appiah argues for a shared humanity that demands a “kindness to strangers.” In a world where “strangers” are closer than ever before, meaningful engagements that transcend cultural differences are vital.

Implications for Generation Z

Given changes in the way we interact, access and use information, young people growing up today will need new skills to enable them to engage complex problems. These skills involve being able to offer informed and productive critiques of ideas, values and beliefs; a disposition toward creativity in sorting out the complexities that accompany the interaction of different perspectives; and collaboration on problems that emerge when ideas, values and beliefs prove difficult to reconcile.

Trend #5. Leveling of Global Markets and Mass Global Consumerism

Consumerism is a powerful force that will influence how Generation Z engages in global communities. The traditional structure that supported the local production and consumption of goods has given way to a flat system that defies boundaries. These conditions reflect Thomas Friedman’s notion of a Flat World, where technology enables people to create, share and comment on content. The flattening and opening of markets is in turn changing relationships among people. Today, people all over the world aspire to similar styles, cultural expressions, and economic status. The global communication infrastructure feeds an appetite for similar ideas, fashions, and products. Young people in China desire things very similar to what young people in Germany and Chile and Angola and the United States desire. These are the markets and consumer structures within which Generation Z will live and work.

Implications for Generation Z

Generation Z participates in the network where global markets operate. They are the target of advertisers, participants in a marketplace of cultural ideas, and arbiters of emerging trends. Generation Z will need critical skills to respond to the lure of global markets such as being able to think independently, to make judgments based on cultural context and to apply their core values when making decisions. In short, Generation Z will need intelligent consumer behavior – as both consumers of goods and ideas and as participants in a level marketplace.

Trend #6. Balancing Culture in Local and Global Contexts

Global markets and mass consumerism create new structures that overlap old political boundaries. This in turn changes the relationships people have within and among the communities to which they belong. Our everyday lives are now affected by global culture in ways that were never before possible. The mass appeal of global consumer goods and ideas also crosses cultural borders and creates what some have called cultural contamination. Critics worry that local cultures are being eliminated by a lowest common cultural denominator (often corporate Western cultural ideas such as Disney and McDonalds). But globalization does not erode of local culture. Instead, the pull of globalism is being met with an equally strong push from local culture. This local push is tradition-bound, highly personal and

integrated with our human need to physically connect with others. Local cultures are amplified and intensified in the emerging global culture. With new technologies, people know each other despite the distance between them, but they also need to define themselves in unique ways so that they can become better "known." People will seek to retain local culture despite the globalization of culture so they can define themselves and stand out amidst a pressing homogeneity of global culture.

Implications for Generation Z

Generation Z will need to balance the pull of a global mass culture with the push of local traditions. In part, this balancing act requires navigation between local and global cultures by knowing and understanding local and global systems. It also requires that we act in deliberate ways to preserve local culture, share our cultural resources and ideas, seek out knowledge and experiences with other cultures, and be open and receptive to cultural ideas different from our own. New and emerging technologies and media will assist in these tasks.