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Redefining Education for Gen Z: Heutagogy, Internships, and Collective Efforts Toward a Resilient Future

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Cover Page Footnote

Many thanks to Dr. Porath for her vision.

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Carolyn Hall

Introduction

In 1915, more than 100 years ago, John Dewey and his *Schools of Tomorrow*, argued that schools should be more flexible and adaptive to the needs of students, enabling them to learn at their own pace and in their way. “The school must represent present life—life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground” (p. 18). Just as Dewey advocated schools that mirror “real life,” heutagogy and internships extend this century-old progressive vision by equipping Gen Z, who represent a twenty-first century, self-determined learner driven by discovery with the agency and resilience needed for a rapidly shifting future. They initiate and drive their learning process, set personal learning goals, and go after them. This creates autonomy, which is essential for self-directed learning, and personal and professional growth. Recognizing that continuous growth and upskilling are essential to keep pace, they see the benefit of being lifelong learners. In the preview of the book *Generation Z Goes to College* by Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace (2016), they state that the incoming class of Generation Z has “different motivations, learning styles, characteristics, skill sets and social concerns...”

These findings are from an in-depth study of over 1,100 Generation Z college students from 15 U.S. higher education institutions as well as additional studies from youth, market, and education research related to this generation. According to Blaschke (2012), the heutagogical framework emphasizes the development of these skills, attitudes, and capacities to reach beyond traditional, structured learning. Blaschke synthesizes empirical studies that show how heutagogical learning environments promote learner autonomy, digital literacy, and resilience. One job outlook survey, conducted by The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2023), showed that “Students with internships are 50% more likely to be employed at graduation.” The project, The Future of Education and Skills 2030, hosted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, emphasized the need for resilient, student-centered learning systems that promote well-being, adaptability, and social responsibility.

AI’s accelerated pace is reshaping the role of education. Frye and Osborne’s peer-reviewed 2013 study—*The Future of Employment: How Susceptible Are Jobs to Computerization?*—translated their findings into an *at-risk* pool of occupations in the U.S. labor market that have a high probability ($\geq 70\%$) of being fully automated or computerized over the next decade or two based on their task structure. Education, which is rooted in interpersonal and creative expertise, will experience transformation through automation. However, this transformation will be in the form of task augmentation not the replacement of teachers. Even though automation will continue to change the face of education, teachers will remain essential because they bring human capacities of emotional intelligence, moral judgment, and interpersonal engagement that AI cannot replicate. Students will need to be equipped with the legerity to navigate a labor market in which technological change is both inevitable and accelerating. When paired with heutagogy and

applied experiences like internships, “Automation becomes a resilience amplifier rather than a threat” (OpenAI, 2025).

As 21st-century learners, Gen Z is the first generation whose formative years align with the rapid evolution of technology and global interconnectedness. The power that the Boomers wielded with institutional influence, Gen Z now commands with digital fluency. They prefer communicating through their phone on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube over sending or receiving emails. One of the issues with traditional schooling is the disconnect between what is being learned and what is needed to thrive in this brave new world! Ways must be found to bridge that gap. Gen Z is self-motivated, proactive, reflective, and flexible. Purpose motivates them. The Gen Z learner prioritizes education by its relevance to real-world challenges such as climate change, social justice, and mental health.

Emphasis on the development of skills and capacities that go beyond traditional, structured learning support Gen Z’s hyper-proficient use of technology. They leverage modern tools such as digital platforms, AI and automation, financial apps like Venmo, Cash App, or tools like YNAB (You Need A Budget) to manage their personal finances. The integration of digital tools and online platforms allows myriad resources, global collaboration, and personalization of their learning experiences. These tools are the rebar in the twenty-first century education.

This paper argues that the implementation of three strategies—heutagogy, internships, and collective efforts for a resilient future—can effectively guide the transition from the current state of traditional education to the desired future in education and professional development. As a Boomer grandmother observing my Gen Z grandsons, I feel that I’m in the catbird seat—a place that allows me to reflect, appreciate, and empathize. I witnessed the Civil Rights Movement that began in 1954 and gained momentum in the late 50s and 60s, the first human, Neil Armstrong, step onto the lunar surface on July 20, 1969, and the explosion of the World Wide Web in 1989 and in the early 2000s. Those lived experiences give me a myriad kaleidoscope to see the complexity of their challenges and the many different facets and perspectives that radiate from those places. Each strand—heutagogy, internships, and collective efforts toward a resilient future—are not just add-ons to education. Woven together, they offer a moment which can be the cementing agent that turns these strands into a new educational promise, one rooted in agency, relevance, and resilience.

Heutagogy

Heutagogy (based on the Greek for “self”) was defined by Hase and Kenyon in 2001 in their study of self-determined learning. The heutagogical framework focuses on lifelong learning and student-centered instruction. It is considered holistic for creating 21st-century, self-determined learners because it emphasizes the development of skills, attitudes, and capacities that go beyond traditional, structured learning. These learners are capable of self-regulation, tech savvy, and digitally literate. Heutagogy can build Gen Z’s inner engine (agency and reflective judgment) allowing them to be prepared to set goals, pivot, and learn under uncertainty (OpenAI, 2025). Blaschke further explains:

In a heutagogical approach to teaching and learning, learners are highly autonomous and self-determined, and emphasis is placed on development of learner capacity and

capability with the goal of producing learners who are well-prepared for the complexities of today's workplace. (2012)

The heutagogical framework integrates cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning that encourage reflection and experiential learning, allowing the learner to connect theory with real-world application, thereby supporting the development of a well-rounded learner. According to Seemiller et al. (2016), this fits Generation Z's learning preferences and its digital fluency. Empirical evidence by Turner (2015), from *The Journal of Individual Psychology*, shows that Gen Z prefers learning environments where students engage directly with the material rather than passively receiving information from a teacher or lecture. Educators can incorporate heutagogical principles into their teaching to promote self-determined learning and enhance student motivation. Here, there is a shift in focus. This generation values practical experiences over theoretical instruction. Heutagogy can fill that space. It is a progression from pedagogy to andragogy to heutagogy where learners progress in maturity and autonomy (Canning, 2010).

Heutagogical learning is not linear. Engagement with content is aligned with the individual needs of the learner thereby leveraging technologies and learning resources. This is the picture of the 21st-century learning landscape. It prepares Gen Z for lifelong learning which is part of the heutagogical framework. "In an era where jobs and industries rapidly evolve, the ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn is critical" (OpenAI, 2025). Heutagogy builds and nurtures confidence and resilience. It places the responsibility of learning on the individual. Learners, in turn, gain the skills and mindset to navigate challenges and uncertainties on their own. Heutagogy aligns with the following 21st-century challenges:

- The need for learners to manage their own learning in unpredictable contexts.
- The increasing importance of soft skills like collaboration, communication, and emotional intelligence.
- The necessity of interdisciplinary thinking to tackle global issues.
- The interconnectedness of the generations.

The replacement of humans with robots further exacerbate Gen Z's feelings of insecurity that their education has not adequately prepared them for 21st-century workplace environments. This highlights a mismatch between traditional education and the dynamic demands of the 21st-century job market. For instance, routine tasks that were traditionally entry-level jobs and steppingstones for young workers are being automated with robots and Artificial Intelligence. These learners already use platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and LinkedIn. These same platforms could be used to advocate and celebrate the benefits of heutagogy and experiential learning in preparing for modern careers, to build online communities to connect like-minded peers, educators, and administrators who support this effort and encourage Gen Z to be their own harbinger for change.

Gen Z can use their digital fluency, collaborative spirit, and activism to advocate for education and internships that embrace heutagogical principles. By emphasizing the need for personalized, practical, and flexible learning models, they can influence systemic change, ensuring that education equips them with the skills and experiences needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving job market.

However, the impracticality of implementing a full-blown educational framework of heutagogy has met with some reluctance because “the removal of the educator makes the concept of heutagogy impractical in a credentialing institution” (McAuliffe et al., 2009, pp. 13-18). Educators in the nursing, engineering, and education professions have found heutagogy to be a creditable response to the critical issues that their learners are faced with in the workplace and have designed their learning environments based on that approach (Ashton & Newman, 2006; Bhoyrub et al., 2010; Gardner et al., 2007). Research in higher education has documented successful heutagogical interventions such as project-based and inquiry-based learning, leading to improved problem-solving and critical thinking outcomes (Blaschke, 2012).

Trade Schools and Internships

Traditional education often does not keep up with technological advancements, leaving this new generation unprepared. One of the ways to bridge that gap is through internships. If someone wants to become a content influencer, like one of my Gen Z grandsons, then an internship on a YouTube channel would be a perfect fit. And, if that channel was a sports channel, that would be even better since his degree is in Sports Journalism. There, he would learn the skills necessary to produce, market and potentially, make money. Structured internships turn heutagogical capabilities (e.g., adaptability, creativity, and problem solving) into human capital (e.g., skills, portfolio), social capital (e.g., mentors, referrals), and signal capital (e.g., credentials, supervisor evaluations) (OpenAI, 2025). These are traits that enable learners to thrive in unpredictable and complex environments.

This is not a new phenomenon. From the time of the Industrial Revolution, modern trade schools evolved out of the need for skilled workers to operate machinery and perform specialized tasks in engineering, mechanics, and construction. Twenty-first century trade schools have added value to Gen Z students by offering practical education, financial benefits, and alignment with current job market demands. Trades are flourishing as college enrollment shrinks. “The number of students enrolled in vocational-focused community colleges rose 16% last year to its highest level ... since 2018” (Reynolds, 2024, p. 2). “If I would have gone to college after school, I would be dead broke,” one young man working at a Ford plant told the Associated Press in a story about young people skipping college in favor of the skilled trades. Instead, he’s making \$24 an hour at age 19 with no student debt. “Sure, people who skip college miss out on the ‘college experience,’ but the ‘college experience’ often translates into ‘four (or five, or six) years of drinking and partying on borrowed money, followed by debt and regret’” (Reynolds, 2024, p. 3). Reynolds expands on the long-term impact of a traditional four-year degree:

The reward of college was supposed to be a good job at the end. But jobs for college grads today aren’t as good as they once were, while tuition and fees have skyrocketed much faster than wage growth—meaning that many students are graduating with massive debts they likely will be unable to repay. (Reynolds, 2024, p. 1)

I just glanced at an article from the Washington Post (May 12, 2024) quoting a Wall Street Journal article that says, “Gen Z is becoming the ‘toolbelt generation’” (Reynolds, 2024, p. 2). This label refers to the uptick in the number of Gen Z students who are choosing the trade school path over college.

In the 1960s, I had a co-op job (cooperative education) at the Ford Motor Car Company. I was in the business curriculum at Cass Technical High School. My co-op job combined practical experience with my academic learning. I drafted correspondence, took dictation, and transcribed meetings. I became comfortable using office equipment, interacting with other professionals, and learned the importance of appearance. These were skills that enhanced everything I was learning in school. Co-op jobs were aligned with the 20th-century emphasis on practical, career-oriented education. Their focus was on building skills for long-term employment that were tied to that era's economy. Interestingly, co-ops reflected our career path. When I applied for a secretarial position with the Internal Revenue Service, all the skills I had learned in school, plus the hands-on experience I had gotten from my co-op position at Ford Motor Car Company, helped me secure my first job.

An internship gives the student a chance to explore a potential career path. This is important to Gen Z because employment for this cohort is no longer limited to traditional, full-time jobs. This generation has options. For instance, MEMS (microelectromechanical systems) is a program that has a 100-percent job-placement rate where every student who completes it, "receives a full-time offer often before they even graduate" (Matherly, 2024, p. 3). The woman interviewed by Matherly stated, "I had already dedicated three years of my life to college. I couldn't put in more years without knowing if I was going to get something out of it." The 100-percent placement rate sold her!

Employment in the 21st century is defined by diversity, flexibility, and technology. Twenty-first century education must, then, include these same tenets. Gen Z's student population is questioning whether traditional learning is really the road to success. Marketing for colleges often emphasizes that higher education prepares students for well-paying jobs and career growth. The U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS) reported in October 2024:

Full time wage and salary workers aged 25 and over with less than a high school diploma had median weekly earnings of \$734 compared with \$946 for high school graduates with no college, and \$1,053 for workers with some college or an associate degree. Workers with only a bachelor's degree had median weekly earnings of \$1,533 while workers with an advanced degree had median weekly earnings of \$1,916 in the third quarter of 2024. Now, faced with repayment of student loans, unpredictable job markets, the sacrifice of personal time to get where they are, they're asking, 'Where is my job?' (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024)

Navigating career opportunities as a student requires strategy. Calvin, my oldest Gen Z grandson, is the Assistant Controller for one of the largest minority-owned automotive suppliers in North America. His internships, which began his first year at Eastern Michigan University, paved the way to this position. Diversifying his efforts resulted in securing a good start to his professional journey. He was offered internships that resulted from belonging to such organizations as the National Association of Black Accountants (NABA). He said, "I did not rely solely on NABA. I was putting my eggs in multiple baskets by applying for as many internships as I could." This paid great dividends. According to Calvin, his internships had added value. "They gave me a 'foot in the door' but they also allowed me to experience different areas of accounting to determine what segment of the industry I was most interested in."

My youngest grandson, Joel, a graduate of Michigan State University with a bachelor's degree in Sports Journalism, had a different experience. On several of his internship interviews, he was asked about his experience. His experience? How is it possible to be asked on an interview for an internship what experience you have and be turned down because you don't have any? Aren't internships supposed to offer the opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge learned in school, within a professional environment, to get a modicum of that experience? This is one of the biggest barriers to internships actually fulfilling their purpose. When employers require prior experience, this creates a catch-22 for that Gen Z population who is seeking their *first* opportunity to gain that very experience.

As I was writing this op ed, I read that colleges need to create content that will draw the Gen Z cohort to its web pages. I immediately thought of my grandson. This is what he does. But, more importantly, this is who he is: a content creator. Using this type of resource in an internship would be a win-win for the student as well as the institution.

Staneisha, my oldest grandson's fiancée, is a member of the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE). Since entering Michigan State University, she has been the recipient of internships each year as a member of NSBE.

However, internships are not all paid positions. In a policy brief from the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions, Matthew Hora and his colleagues stated:

Internships can be “door openers” to opportunity and social mobility for college students, but unpaid internships pose considerable legal, ethical, and practical challenges. In particular, low-income and first-generation students may be unable to pursue unpaid positions, thereby acting as a discriminatory gatekeeping function that exacerbates inequality. (Hora et al., 2022)

Whether given by organizations that provide internships for their scholar members or internships to students who need their 21st-century skills developed and honed, internships can be one of the 21st century's avenues to success. It can be one of the ways to answer Gen Z's question, “Where's my job?”

Collective Efforts for a Resilient Future

Advocacy for Gen Z is paying attention to and acting on issues like climate change, racial justice and mental health—issues that matter most to them. They use social media campaigns, online petitions, viral hashtags, and live-streamed events to build momentum around the issues they care about.

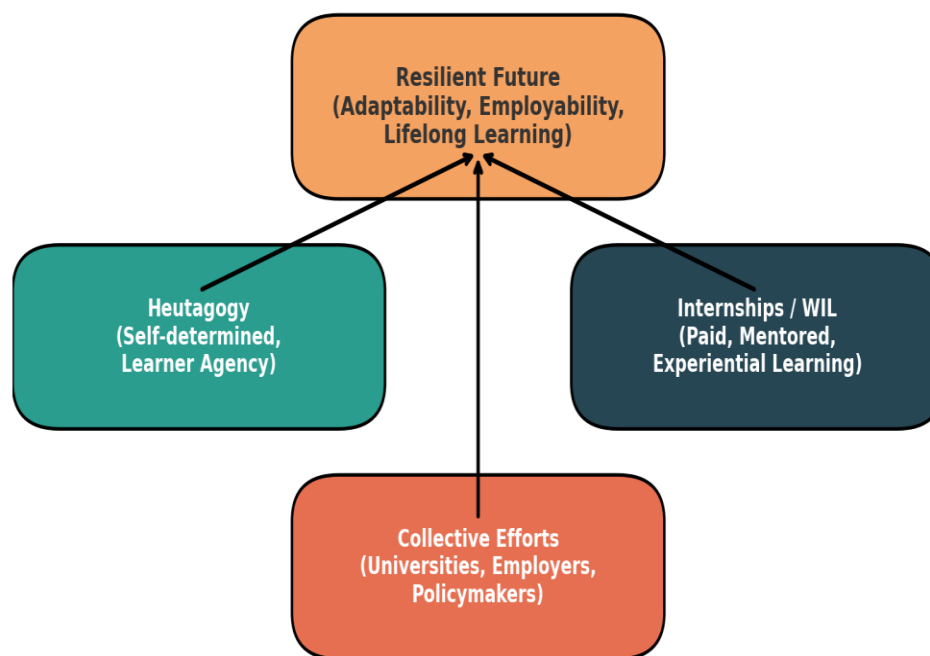
According to the Gen Z's I know, a resilient future is thriving in a world that is equitable, innovative, and adaptable. A world where individuals, communities, and systems can adapt to challenges and recover from setbacks. I picked up a business card from a Gen Z business. The tagline read, “To exist and continue in spite of danger and adversity.” Gen Z's future is filled with challenges that are met with ingenuity and where the well-being of both the individual and the collective lead the way.

Another area of concern for Gen Z is preparing for jobs that do not currently exist. Paying attention to the current landscape of the job market, they must focus on areas where humans have the edge such as creativity and complex decision making. However, the educational environment must support these efforts, and one of the ways to do that is with the professional development that can be found in internships. While these uncertainties are unsettling, the good news is that they also offer an opportunity for redefinition of oneself and the building of one's resilience.

Collective, intergenerational efforts can be multiplied and the gains sustained by using cross-age teams that can serve to move knowledge in both directions: experienced workers share practical, intuitive expertise gained through extensive experience that is difficult to articulate in words, and Gen Z can reciprocate by sharing their digital fluency. The following conceptual model (see Figure 1) visualizes the convergence of heutagogy, internships, and collective efforts, to produce a resilient future for Gen Z:

Figure 1

Conceptual Model: Heutagogy, Internships, and Collective Efforts for Gen Z's Resilient Future



Pathways:
 Heutagogy builds learner agency → Internships provide real-world application →
 Collective efforts institutionalize equity & access → Resilient future for Gen Z

Limitations, a Gap, and a Call to Action

While this article advances the argument that heutagogy, internships, and collective intergenerational efforts form a critical framework for redefining education for Generation Z, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies primarily on secondary

sources, conceptual frameworks, and existing empirical studies but does not present original fieldwork or primary data collection. Second, not addressing the non-Western contexts (systems of thought and practice that originate outside of Western cultures) limits the generalizability of the findings. Third, the rapidly changing nature of AI and automation creates challenges for long-term validity. Fourth, cross-generational patterns of AI adoption in both formal and informal learning settings require further empirical investigation. Finally, institutional constraints, policy environments, or structural inequities may limit implementation.

Future research should incorporate mixed-methods studies and longitudinal data to deepen and test its claims. The transferability of the findings is limited by its scope since the participants are confined to a particular generation: Generation Z. Also, students who are already inclined toward self-determined learning may reflect “self-selection bias,” which occurs when the selection process is not random due to the individuals selecting themselves into a group. When this happens, the group no longer represents the larger population. This can distort the findings and reduce the validity of the conclusions. Finally, the phrase “subjectivity isn’t a flaw—it’s a source of insight” has been linked in spirit to Soren Kierkegaard, the “Father of Existentialism.” Kierkegaard argued that some truths can only be grasped through lived, personal experience. My background, values, experiences, and perspectives shape how I ask questions, interpret data, and relate to my participants.

The interpretive nature of qualitative research makes it impossible to fully eliminate the positionality of the researcher as it relates to subjectivity. Patti Lather (1991) argues, “The co-construction of knowledge is not [to be considered] a contaminant to be eradicated.” She examines how the processes of research and education are not neutral, and that knowledge is produced through social and political dynamics, all shaped by the power relations between researchers and participants or teachers and students. Instead, it is the seedlings of learning and intellectual development that take root, grow, and eventually mature and become fully developed to produce a bumper crop. Heutagogy, internships, and collective efforts act as the sunlight, water, and fertile ground that will allow this generation not just to survive the shifting landscapes of automation and global change, but to grow into resilient innovators and reflectors of the light while preparing for the future.

Most of what we know about heutagogy comes from overseas classrooms and programs in India, Indonesia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. However, empirical evidence on heutagogy involving U.S. student populations remains limited. This gap limits the generalizability of findings and underscores the need for future studies to test heutagogical approaches with American students. We need large-scale studies to show how self-determined learning plays out with our own students. That silence is an invitation for educators, policymakers, together with our students to collaborate and test heutagogy here in our own schools and colleges, and let our findings shape the future of learning at home. It’s time to turn the U.S. from a spectator into a laboratory where heutagogy is not just theory but practice.

Research Methods

Using an argument that builds on the “threefold cord” of heutagogy (a learning theory), internships (an experiential bridge to work), and collective intergenerational efforts

(sociocultural force), makes this method conceptual. No new primary data was collected. Rather than building theory from observation or experiments, the secondary research tradition was used which builds by interpreting what has already been observed, argued, or recorded. It synthesizes existing empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and generational analyses (Blaschke on heutagogy, Frye & Osborne on automation risk, Seemiller & Grace on Gen Z). It proposes a new way to think about resilience in education using research from education, automation, and generational studies.

Reflection

Because heutagogy is not only a departure from traditional education but is also a theory of self-determined learning, the evidence base for its relevance is still emerging. Longitudinal studies that track heutagogical graduates into their careers remain scarce. What is known about heutagogy is that it aligns directly with Gen Z's independence and digital fluency. From experience, we also know that internships can serve as bridges between formal learning and employability. The role of collective, intergenerational actions that sustain resilience is also underexplored. Questions remain of how educators, employers, policymakers, and Gen Z themselves can co-contribute to a system that maintains the relevancy of learning to keep up with industries that are ever evolving. These disparate parts—heutagogical curricula, meaningful internships, and coordinated societal support—must combine to create a workforce that is not only job ready, but future ready. These intersections must have the momentum to move us from well-intentioned strategies to processes that are proven, measurable, and scalable.

Conclusion

The heutagogical framework, internships, and the collective efforts of educators, administrators, advocates of educational reform, and Gen Z (as their own herald) all contribute to creating a rich and resilient future. This “future depends on finding a balance between preservation of the past and transformation for a new generation of learners” (Selingo, 2025). This is not optional but essential in an age of rapid technological and economic change. Working in tandem, these efforts have the potential to move us closer to Gen Z's answer to “Where's my job?”

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