

TO MEME OR NOT TO MEME, THAT IS THE QUESTION: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF TEACHING LAW TO THE GEN Z

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Abstract

This paper provides an autoethnographic exploration of teaching law to Gen Z learners, by focussing on how the use of memes, pop culture, and innovative pedagogies which incorporate collaborative learning have bridged the generational gap within the author's classrooms in a law school. The study draws from the author's experiences as a Millennial teacher at an institution that favours discussions and critical thinking over rote learning, allowing her to explore teaching methods that are inclusive of the students' learning preferences and attention patterns. The paper demonstrates how assigning readings that are relatable, using memes as interpretive tools, and setting assignments like 101 projects, that prioritise experiential learning have facilitated learning within the Gen Z classrooms, ensuring that complex legal formats become accessible and memorable through participative formats. The author also expounds how today's learners value dialogue and clarity over conventional forms of teaching by delivering lectures. The study also presents how these digital natives interact with the constant access to information which shapes not only their learning, but also their sociopolitical engagement. Ultimately, the paper makes the case for abandoning the myth that Gen Z does not want to learn. Instead, the author proposes that creativity, empathy and reflexivity on the part of the teachers aids in creating a collaborative learning space grounded in trust and shared curiosity, ensuring learning without prejudice.

Keywords: Memes, pop culture, Gen Z learners, digital nativity, collaborative learning.

INTRODUCTION

"To meme or not to meme, that is the question..."

This alteration of the Shakespearean quote aptly summarises the current teaching dilemmas in higher education institutions, where there is a constant struggle to maintain student attention while ensuring that learning outcomes are met. In today's world, it would be difficult to find a person who has not engaged with memes, especially if they have a smartphone and an internet connection. According to Kirby Conrod, a professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College, the concept of a meme can be explained as "a self-replicating chunk of information — by asking someone about an inside joke they had with friends or an advertising jingle that's been stuck in their head for 20 years" (Benveniste, 2022). Memes have a world of their own, where some members of the current generation choose to communicate exclusively through memes, offering a succinct, pictorial mode of expression that requires few words. At first glance, it appears to be a very unserious, non-academic way of expression, but this paper, employing an autoethnographic method of analysis, argues that the use of memes and pop culture in teaching can serve as a tool of communication and relatability, thereby bridging the ever-widening chasm between generations.

The purpose of this study is threefold: first, to make a case for using memes and other media as tools for teaching and learning; second, to present a more holistic picture of the current generation of young learners, specifically in higher education institutions teaching law; and third, to dispel the myth of the *uninterested learners*, a term widely used to describe Gen Z learners. The scope of this study is limited to the learning and teaching of law to Gen Z using the autoethnographic method, where my own experiences as a Millennial teacher will be used to analyse and reflect upon the learning methods and preferences of Gen Z. To supplement my observations and reflections, I have also conducted an informal survey as part of an anonymous feedback mechanism I employ every semester, where the students are able to provide their thoughts on the teaching methods, and the assignments. I have also used some quotes here to support my points, with the due permission of the students.

The autoethnographic method "uses personal experience ("auto") to describe and interpret ("graph") cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ("ethno")" (Adams et al., 2017). The method accounts for the personal

experiences, inclinations, social and political positions, while allowing the ethnographer to reflexively analyse their experiences, “to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life” (Adams et al., 2017). There are primarily two reasons to use this method for this research: first, the lack of literature on teaching law to Gen Z, and its reception by the intended learners. The available literature on learning and development-based interventions includes behavioural analyses of Gen Z conducted within the context of general learning preferences and their attention spans. For example, (Pal et al., 2024), or (*Students 2024*, n.d.), or (‘Generation Z’, n.d.). Although relevant and very important, there are only rare academic interventions that analyse Gen Z’s relationship with the current world socially, politically, economically, and legally. Using autoethnography enables me to reflect on my experiences with Gen Z, allowing these aspects to be discussed as they emerge within the curriculum itself. My positionality as an academic and teacher, specifically in the field of law, allows me to directly receive the reactions, opinions, and stances of my students, who are part of Gen Z.

The second reason for using this method is that my position as a Millennial law teacher is also relevant in the discussion, as my generational proximity puts me in a unique position of being able to access the language, thought processes, and preferences that Gen Z uses to learn, thus allowing me to facilitate discussions where students are able to put forth their ideas and are able to relate with my teaching methods. Considering this, autoethnography enables me to reflect on my own positionality, as I am a law teacher in a privileged institution with access to a mostly captive audience in the form of a classroom. Additionally, in these times, we are constantly recording and documenting our lives and the world around us. It is also imperative to document this ideological and methodical shift in learning and teaching methods academically, thereby preserving an archive of a constantly changing world.

CONTEXT FOR TEACHING WITH MEMES

The term “meme” was first coined by “the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins... in his 1976 book, “The Selfish Gene.”” (Benveniste, 2022). In its original conception, “a “meme” was analogous to a “phoneme,” the smallest unit of sound in speech, or a “morpheme,” the smallest meaningful subunit of a word” (Benveniste, 2022). Memes have become a way of introducing social commentary and sharing views and opinions, via media that “a piece of media that is repurposed to deliver a cultural, social or political expression, mainly through humor” (Benveniste, 2022). Thus, memes can also be an effective tool to teach, as memes have the power to both “depict and construct” meaning (Meyer, 2021). This power of expression is not limited to the law; it extends to any and every aspect of the world. For example, there are engineering-related memes (*Our Favorite Engineering Memes*, 2025), or memes in sociology (‘Sociological Memes by Students’, 2014), economics memes (*Top Memes All Economists Will Love*, n.d.), etc. There are memes on the general theme of teaching (‘Memes for Teachers’, 2014), and on the themes of being graduate students (Lebovitz, 2017). The possibilities are limitless, and imagination is the key. The use of memes has ensured relatability with students so far and has fostered a sense of openness to learning. One of my students has stated that seeing complex terminologies and theories, made into a meme template for all to consume, and perhaps learn from, showed the class that I was in tune with their world, thus bridging the gap between the student and instructor. This also makes for fun classes, with gamification of the topics, which is also encouraged by the Indian National Education Policy 2020 for the students’ learning (*About National Education Policy | Government of India, Ministry of Education*, n.d.).

The teaching of law is extremely theoretical and requires slow and close reading, with a deep understanding of the concepts, to eventually apply them to real-life scenarios. Like many other professions, the practice of law carries high stakes, and a foundational understanding promises significant outcomes and rewards. In my classes, I have observed that the sooner students understand and live this, the more they are inclined to take in-class instruction and reading seriously. To facilitate this understanding, I engage students with memes, which are their mode of expression and a medium they use in their daily lives. Introducing them to law memes makes topics like writ jurisdiction, interpretation, substantive and legislative operation of law, judicial review, and the basic structure doctrine more palatable, inviting students to ask more questions about why and how the law operates. The students’ familiarity with the memes and the reproductive nature of these snippets curate an experience that allows them to retain more information, with these memes serving as their flashcards during preparation. I would like to note here that memes are not proposed as a substitute for reading the text or for engaging in critical discussions in class. They are designed to provide students with a familiar format, helping them feel less alienated from the material due to its length, complex language, and highly technical concepts. Some examples of such memes are presented below in Figures 1-8.



Figure 1: Writs in constitutional law



Figure 2: Operation of Basic Structure Doctrine



Figure 3: "Office meme" representing the concept of interpretation of statutes



Figure 4: Meme depicting operation of Article 141
Figure 5: Depiction of Trespass to Property



Figure 6: Meme depicting how all laws made by the State must be pass the constitutional tests for testing their validity

Reading court judgments be like

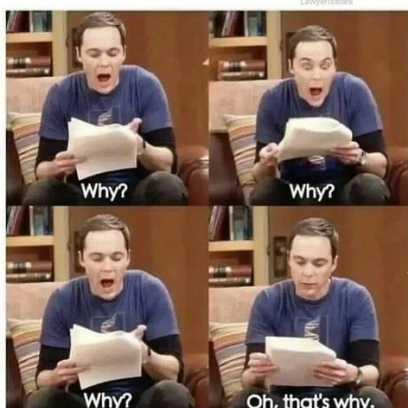


Figure 7: Big Bang Theory meme depicting lengthy case law language



me trying to determine what kind of rule I'm dealing with

Figure 8: Meme depicting one of the rules of interpretation

These mems have been all taken from stock images and are not created by me. These are just a few examples of the mems I have used to teach Constitutional Theory and Torts. These serve as teaching tools, where, after the concept is explained, they become a concise pictorial summary of the concept. To further this exercise, a colleague of mine undertook an internal assessment in which she required students to explain a topic using mems. This exercise, she states, allows her “to assess the student’s understanding of the legal principles, and ability to apply them to pre-existing image templates (or fit them in boxes) that are not at all related to one another. In this way, students could put their creative thinking and legal knowledge to the test. The students’ critical thinking skills were also tested because a lot of the mems were on takeaways from a case or dissenting opinion, etc.”

To facilitate such understanding in my class, I engage students in several innovative internal assessments, such as client counselling, 101 projects, and parliamentary debates. Among these, client counselling and 101 projects are the most highly regarded assignments, as they enable students to be creative and apply their own learning methods to their presentations. Client counselling, as the name suggests, is a session where students meet with a “client” (usually a senior student) and are presented with a hypothetical scenario involving legal issues. They must then counsel the “client” on solutions, while the instructor observes and grades the interaction. This in-

person, oral presentation of solutions orients the students to the high-stakes situations they will face in the real world, and the knowledge that this is just a simulation takes the pressure off. Students have responded positively to this model, reporting that it gives them confidence to participate in in-class written assessments, as they now have a clear understanding of what is expected of them when addressing legal issues. Client counselling also allows for real-time feedback from the instructor, thereby helping students understand the instructor's expectations.

Another assessment is the 101 projects, where students must prepare a 101 explainer of a module in their chosen format. The only brief given was that if a student has an exam tomorrow, they should be able to watch the presentation or read the explainer and successfully appear for the exam. The grading metrics for this assessment include conceptual clarity, readability and accessibility, as well as the comprehensiveness with which students have covered the topic. They are allowed to use any format of their choosing—I have received skits, podcasts, spoofs of cartoons (such as Dora the Defamer), pamphlet-style explainers, movies, regular presentations incorporating memes, songs inspired by rap songs, and a crossover skit featuring Bridgerton and Gossip Girl. These were thoroughly researched projects demonstrating a strong understanding of the foundational concepts of the subject. Like my colleague's experience, I also observed that these projects encourage a novel approach to critical thinking, where students not only engage with the subject, topic, and reading material but also apply their skills and existing knowledge to convey their understanding of the topic. These projects have also become a valuable repository of knowledge, as I have compiled an archive of them and made it accessible to all students. Such projects again imbibe a sense of ownership in the work they have produced, while allowing them to engage with the subject on their own terms, according to their preferences.

TEACHING LAW TO GEN Z: MY TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

I currently teach law at Jindal Global Law School of O. P. Jindal Global University, located in Haryana, where classes are conducted using the Socratic method, encouraging active class participation, and internal assessments designed solely by the instructor. The instructor has complete autonomy within the classroom with respect to class plans, style and mode of instruction, with the requirement of fulfilling the learning outcomes and ensuring that the syllabus is adhered to and completed. This autonomy also allows instructors to use innovative teaching methods and engage in experiential learning through various modes of assignments.

My teaching is also conducted using interactive methods, where students are invited to reflect on the assigned readings, pose questions, and the classroom is a safe space for sharing their thoughts and opinions. I recognise that not all higher education institutions may be able to follow this model of teaching due to several reasons, and I would like to note that my reflections are limited to my engagement with the students at my university, primarily based on my interactions within the classroom.

My classes every semester start with laying down the classroom policies and reading the safe space pledge. Among the classroom policies, one that is notable is the 'no devices' policy in my class. I ensure that the class understands the necessity of this. Although most of the teaching material is available online and shared with the students in digital formats, there has been little resistance to the policy. My intention in this case is to give the students an opportunity to be completely present in class, and also to address the "short attention span" (Pal et al., 2024) attributed to them as a generation. An honest conversation about devices in the classroom and explaining why I do not feel safe when devices are used in class brings them to the same page and lets them see that I am willing to discuss matters with them, rather than imposing rules and restrictions. Such conversations also make them believe that they are adults whom I trust to be responsible, thus leading to a sense of collaboration, empathy, and trust within the classroom space. While creating this sense has always been important in all classrooms, it is rather imperative in the case of Gen Z, as their relationships with their surrounding world are facilitated through devices.

Furthermore, laying down the policy on the first day itself orients the students to how the semester will progress and demonstrates to them that their views and opinions are valued in the classroom. To quote a student reflecting on the past semester, "I believe [the professor] maintained a good balance between letting us think we're COLLEGE students and college STUDENTS at the same time. The difference being in [her] casually talking to us like we talk among ourselves, [but] also disciplining us when needed, so we don't lose our sense of still being students at the end of the day." The necessity of this trust and collaboration within the classroom will be explored in more detail in the subsequent sections of this paper.

GEN Z: PERCEPTIONS AND LEARNING

Gen Z has so far been perceived as a generation with a short attention span, being distracted, people who do not adhere to workplace rules of conduct, especially regarding clothing and hierarchical structures, self-centred, risk-takers, and opinionated (Pal et al., 2024). This perception is well-founded and we, as instructors, can attest to this through our experiences. However, these perceptions have created a negative image of the students in the minds of the instructors. In my interactions with fellow teachers at the University, I have observed a sense of exasperation and helplessness when it comes to ensuring student engagement within the classroom, as well as with in-class lectures and assigned readings. Teachers have reported dull classroom sessions where students do not read and decidedly do not engage with the written material for a variety of reasons. In the law school, this has been observed mainly in humanities classes, where subjects such as sociology and jurisprudence, which are purely theoretical, require students to read lengthy texts with complex concepts. These classes require pre-class readings for students to grasp the concepts being tackled in class, which, my fellow teachers have reported, is no longer effective.

To address this issue, some of my colleagues and I held a classroom discussion and asked the students what they believed would work best for their learning. The benefits of an open dialogue were once again proven, as students reported feeling a sense of being othered and vilified in their learning methods. Students reported that they preferred more peer-to-peer learning and watching videos to understand a topic than just in-class instruction. They also stated that some neurodivergent students struggled with the in-class mode of instruction as they could not focus even if they wanted to, and as a result, remained uninterested in the material. In discussions with instructors, we observed that the teachers were more inclined to continue teaching with their own methods without checking in with the students and catering to their needs. The teachers continued to expect lengthy readings to be completed before class, and compelled class participation, without accounting for the students' preferences about speaking up in class.

Thus, some of us (instructors) decided to change our teaching methods by incorporating suggestions from students, such as requiring students to read the material only *after* it has been discussed in class once or implementing weekly online assignments that would provide students with real-time feedback on their own level of understanding. These assignments also help the teacher gauge where the students stand in terms of their learning and assess if any changes are required in the teaching mode/methods. At JGU, implementing these methods has been easy, as in addition to the classroom sessions, we are also advised to hold in-person office hours with students, where we meet with each student at least twice outside of the classroom to either solve doubts or just check in regarding the semester and the pace of teaching, etc. Through these interactions, it has become clear that the students are interested in learning and receiving feedback, but their learning methods and preferences differ a lot from those of their predecessors. It was also observed that their relationship with learning, specifically learning of the law, is also different. Gen Z does not respond to authoritative lectures; they respond to dialogue. They do not respond well to imposed policies but are very much willing to come to the table for a discussion and to find reasonable solutions. I would like to note here that I recognise that such dialogues and such interventions are not always possible, and structure cannot always be done away with when working within institutions. This, however, does not mean that structure cannot be made accommodating for the ever-changing needs of the generation.

An important part of teaching Gen Z, I have observed, is not so much about teaching as it is about creating an environment of study and work that appeals to them. Having in-class discussions, where the instructor also shares their concerns and limitations, allows students to humanise and view the teacher in a light that encourages them to trust the teacher. For example, my students have reported feeling seen and their concerns shared when I discuss the length of the cases and tell them that I, too, struggle with the length. Admitting that I do not know something also helps them not view me on a pedestal, and it helps me stay on the same level as them, thereby enhancing relatability. These surrounding, supposedly aesthetic practices, enhance the learning experience for students, especially Gen Z. Additionally, sharing your passions with the students and making cross-cultural, cross-modular connections also open up new avenues of teaching and learning.

My classes are interspersed with numerous pop-culture references, as I am an avid moviegoer and enjoy watching sitcoms and other series. Even the memes shared above include Bollywood references, which are from very famous movies that the students are very likely to have watched. Sharing this passion with the students usually results in them sharing their favourites, and the class becomes a place where we relate case law with movie plots, and students retain more information. For example, the topic of Defamation includes a case law regarding a businessman who is suspected of arms trading, which I relate to Ghafoor's character in the series "Ba****ds of Bollywood". And of course, SUITS, the legal drama where Harvey Specter is a hot-shot corporate lawyer in the city of New York. SUITS is almost a rite of passage for law students; everyone has either watched it or knows of it. As a result, relating concepts like vicarious liability to this series helps students relate to the topic

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instantly and retain the information. Students have reported that such examples make them retain the concepts from the subject and recall them during examinations. Thus, incorporating memes and Bollywood references into my teaching has proven to be a successful method for engaging these digital natives.

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP AND DIGITAL NATIVITY

The current generation of learners has a unique relationship with the law. They do not view the law as an overbearing force in their lives, but rather as a tool for them to exercise their rights. They are also experiencing law through their devices, where they are not only exposed to the Indian law and the news, but also to international law. The world is truly at our fingertips now, and our access makes us part of the global discourse. Gen Z was born into this kind of technology and access. Their predecessors have experienced the transition from landlines to cordless phones, as the technology has evolved into smaller and more independent devices. AI has taken over our lives, but Gen Z was born with access to AI. Thus, AI and technology are their truth, just as telephones were for those who came before us. Those who have access to such information are bound to utilise it and make it work to their advantage.

Access to information from all around the world has also had an impact on the general culture of the generation, where students are no longer following traditional learning methods, observing traditional decorum and manners within a profession, and are only willing to respect and admire people who bring substantive knowledge to the table. During my interactions with the students while teaching them constitutional theory or jurisprudence, I have observed that the current generation seems to have a very peculiar relationship with the law. They view rights as truly their own, something the state must not grant, but protect as they inherently possess those rights. The current generation is redefining a multitude of practices, including the way they attend classes, address their teachers, and approach their subjects. Students are exposed to all the information in the world, and today, those who can, are adopting and choosing various methods of interacting with education. Their education model may be domestically restricted, but the information is not, and hence, students today are more than engaged in the global discourse of rights and citizenship (Gent et al., 2013). Today's students feel a shared responsibility to address global issues and humanitarian crises (Gent et al., 2013), and they intend to utilise their education and access to aid in this process.

The youth are using social media, AI, and other digital tools to hold governments accountable, share information, and participate in the politics of not only their own countries, but also those of other countries (*Gen Z Uprising in Asia Shows Social Media Is a Double-Edged Sword*, 2025). Gen Z has recently led national protests against injustices across Asia in Indonesia (Regalado et al., 2025), the Philippines (See, 2025), Bangladesh (*Bangladesh's Gen-Z Battles to Gain Political Ground after Ousting Hasina* | Reuters, n.d.), and most recently Nepal (Kathmandu et al., 2025). According to the New York Times, these protests by “economically frustrated, technologically expert, educationally overqualified—is part of a wellspring of youthful dissent that has flowed in recent years” (Kathmandu et al., 2025). The Nepal protests of 2025 were actually termed the Gen Z protests as the Nepalese youth utilised their digital access to mobilise and carry out a movement of uprising against corruption and nepotism (Kathmandu et al., 2025). India is also no stranger to the vehement political involvement of the youth within politics, which is only getting stronger with the use of social media, for example the most recent AQI protest in Delhi, where youngsters used social media to mobilise against the government to tackle rising pollution levels ('From Delhi's AQI Protest to Nepal's Gen Z Revolt, Outrage in the Age of Social Media Is a New Ball Game', 2025). My students have themselves participated in several on- and off-campus protests using social media as their tool for propagation of information.

Thus, we are witness to a generation that is redefining not only their own relationships with law and order or the government or institutional administrations, but they are also actively participating in the domestic and international politics, recognising a shared burden of global citizenship and digital nativity. We are seeing how the youth are redefining the features of democracy for themselves, recalling and revisiting history to learn from the wrongs, and building a connection with their land and country. And they are doing all this using memes too, for example, the memes during the Nepal unrest (*Indiatimes on Instagram*, 2025), ('When Gen Z Protests, the Revolution Is Hashtag-Ed, Meme-d, and Reel-Ed', 2025). The use of the “One Piece Jolly Roger Flag” during the Nepal protests also shows the conflation of the real and digital worlds, while demonstrating the global citizenship status of Gen Z where the entire generation is participating in protests, divided by borders and language, but united by the symbolism of the pop culture references and shared stories (Harvey, 2025).

TEACHER'S ROLE AND PARTICIPATION:

Based on the above information and my interactions with students at my university (OPJGU), and my alma mater (Modern Law College, affiliated to SPPU), both of which are highly different in their approach to education and teaching, their infrastructures, and syllabi, I have observed that this phenomenon of the shift in learning preferences of Gen Z is common across the board. This is specifically true for the law students. I have thus

attempted to map the major concerns raised by students and instructors, and present here possible solutions or pathways for a better learning and teaching experience for both stakeholders.

One of the most common concerns raised by the teachers has been that students are passive in class, distracted, and not interested in the subject matter. Conversely, the students have stated that they feel the teachers are aggressive and dismissive and are unable to convey why they should study the topic. This is a unique situation where it seems that students are expecting instructors to almost justify their presence in the educational institution and explain why they should study a particular subject. However, there is more nuance to this matter. After reflecting on this concern with my peers and students, the students revealed that they prefer more engagement with the 'why' of studying rather than just learning because the curriculum demands it. With access to the world's information at their fingertips, they seek to engage in meaningful discourse and are not interested in rote learning. Thus, instructors must bring to the classroom a discussion on why the subject matters and bring in their positionality with respect to the subject. One way would be to recognise and respect the alleged disinterest and engage with it in class or office hours to understand the needs of the respective cohorts. Here, the ethic of trust and collaboration goes a long way in inviting students to reflect on the reasons for learning something rather than just imposing a curriculum.

Another concern raised by the instructors was that students are highly critical in their thinking without having a foundational understanding of the subject matter. Adding to the issue is the use of AI to produce assignment essays and critical pieces without engaging with the assigned readings within the curriculum. This can again be addressed by a collaborative classroom space, where instructors take a piece of critique presented by the student and reverse-engineer the concept, rather than insisting upon linear learning. Such an approach, also known as non-linear learning, is useful for establishing an interdisciplinary understanding of concepts while engaging students' perspectives. We must remember that the current generation of students is born into a culture of critique. Thus, instructors must engage with that critique, and most importantly, explain the meaning and purpose of critique using the students' perspective. Using memes and new technology, addressing the use of AI and allowing its use in generating essays is an inevitable step at this stage. Instead of pushing back, instructors must incorporate the new methods of learning. For example, I demonstrate to my students how to provide relevant prompts to large language models to produce the required results and then engage in an in-class exercise of editing the product for conceptual clarity, using the reading material from the course. This plays an important role in letting the students understand that while they may outsource work to AI, they must not outsource their thinking. These exercises also motivate and inspire the students to engage with the subject matter on their own terms, facilitating their learning.

CONCLUSION

Having addressed some recommendations in the previous section, I would like to reiterate the point that, although the teaching of certain subjects requires a certain level of structure, we must not forget our position as learners while facilitating the learning of the new generations to come. We have also faced struggles where our concerns have not been addressed. The current generation is affording us the opportunity to rethink these ways and develop new methods of learning. To use memes or not may be a personal choice, but the requirement of innovation in teaching has not been clearer than today. When students start asking urgent questions, begin using novel technology, and start speaking a different language, we must come to the classroom with novel solutions, empathy, and respect, while holding ourselves accountable to explain the core of education—the point of learning at all.

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