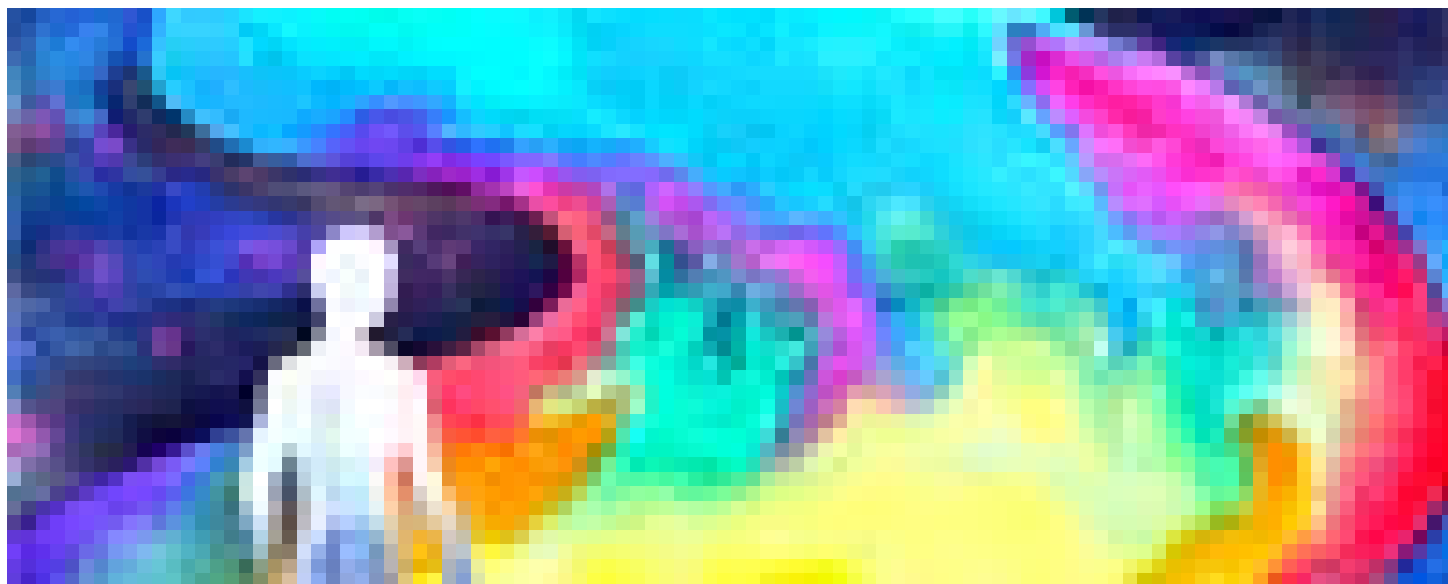


4 Steps for Humanizing Personalized Learning

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May 17, 2021



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Most educators can probably agree that more personalization in learning is needed for the fall—perhaps more than ever before. Students will be entering classrooms with varied experiences during the pandemic, entering classrooms with uneven skill sets and knowledge levels.

But the reality is this has always been the case. Now, however, it's being framed as learning loss, with parents, administrators and educators advocating for learning recovery or acceleration. It's bad enough that these terms are inherently deficit-based, focusing on what students do not know, but what's worse is that this framing is likely to incite panic and anxiety, when the focus should be on healing from a traumatic year.

The world is a different place than it was two years ago, and while that can be a bit scary, it also can be liberating. To set foot into untrodden territory can be exciting, and we must not let our unfounded fears of learning loss or misguided motivations for

learning acceleration trick us into going back to what we were doing before the pandemic.

This includes outdated and misguided thinking on personalized learning. The kind of personalized learning students need is not the kind you might think.

In my book “[Reclaiming Personalized Learning](#),” I delineate between what I call “humanized personalization” and “dehumanized personalization.” I developed this distinction after having worked in Silicon Valley for 3 years, partnering with technologists to develop tools for personalization. Of all the lessons learned, the most important was this: if we center technology and deficit-based thinking in our philosophy for personalization, we not only work against our collective efforts for equitable, personalized learning, we inadvertently harm students in the process.



We must tread lightly as we plan for a new school year, and we must ensure healing comes without inflicting any further harm on our students. When engaging in conversations about personalized learning with your school for the fall, consider these four steps for humanizing personalization, so that you can reach all students without creating any other problems.

Center Your Students' Humanity

Humanization is not a novel concept—but sometimes, it sure feels like one. Paolo Freire, author of “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” is often credited with contextualizing this term for education. To humanize, Freire posits, is to become more human as one ages, grows and evolves. Our students’ experiences in the classroom have, by and large, been dehumanized for far too long. Education has been defined in terms of quantitative test scores and career readiness, forgetting that learning is part of the human condition.

Centering students’ humanity isn’t a destination; it’s a decision you must make every day in your classroom. It starts with studying and discussing identity, and then using students’ understanding of identity as a foundation for infusing it into the entire curriculum.

This can take on myriad forms, including discussing how identity impacts a character’s experience within works of fiction, to telling the stories of often marginalized voices within a given historical time period. When studying the history of Chicago with my third-grade students, understanding identity was critical to understanding Chicago’s long-standing inequality. Leveraging [Project Zero’s thinking routines](#), my students used provocations such as racial dot maps or income maps to make observations and discuss ways systemic oppression shows up in our city. We even interviewed residents to learn about challenges they face, resulting in my students writing letters to local aldermen, advocating for change.

Redefine Success in Your Classroom

For too long, our students’ successes have been defined in terms of academic achievement, inevitably categorizing students into those who find success and those who do not. This is no way to humanize personalization in our classrooms. When personalized learning is humanized, each child’s definition of success should be liberated to evolve with the child. No, this doesn’t mean you have to abandon all

emphasis on academics; it simply means shifting your assessment practices from quantitative point totals and test scores to qualitative feedback that tells the story of your students' learning journey.

When we shift from test scores to storytelling, we humanize not only the process of learning, but the process of assessment. Assessment actually comes from the Latin *assessus* meaning “a sitting by.” It's quite remarkable what happens when we reframe assessment as a teacher “sitting by” their students and learning from their journeys: we liberate ourselves from the task of categorizing and ranking students, and instead reposition ourselves as thought partners in their respective educational journeys.