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Content-Centered to Student-Centered: A Taxonomy of Personalized Learning

By Tom Vander Ark on August 2, 2017 8:00 AM | No comments

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I'm glad that my friend Checker Finn supports personalized learning, but it's worth putting his point of view into a broader context. **Checker is in favor of personalized learning** "defined as enabling every child to move through the prescribed curriculum at his or her own speed, progressing on the basis of individual mastery of important skills and knowledge rather than in lockstep according to age, grade level and end-of-year assessments."

Checker, like his colleagues at Fordham and **The Core Knowledge Foundation**, is a "true believer in the centrality of a first-rate, content-rich curriculum." They'd argue that to do stuff you need to know stuff--that knowledge is a scaffold, a vocabulary and the basis of social capital.

This view, however, limits one's options regarding personalized learning. And, from a learner experience standpoint, it implies a prescribed path through a body of content. Supports and pacing may vary, but the journey and outcomes are well defined.

In contrast, "student-centered learning," advanced by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, "engages students in their own success—and incorporates their interests and skills into the learning process."

The chart below contrasts Checker's point of view on content rich learning with student-centered learning (**P21** and deeper learning are plotted between the two given their stronger nod to core standards than more progressive frameworks).

	Discovery-Based Learning	Student-Centered Learning	Deeper Learning	Content Rich Learning	Lockstep Learning
Premise	Learners should follow their interests	Focus on agency, competency, anywhere learning	Focus on 4Cs & mindset, core standards	Comprehensive knowledge and skill standards	Comprehensive curriculum, age cohorts
Personalized Learning	Student-driven learning	Students have voice and choice in experiences and demonstrations	Balance of student choice and content standards	Modified pacing and supports	Limited accommodations
Supporters, Advocates	Montessori	Nellie Mae Ed Fdn, Education Reimagined	P21, Hewlett Foundation,	Fordham Institute, Core Knowledge	Traditional schools

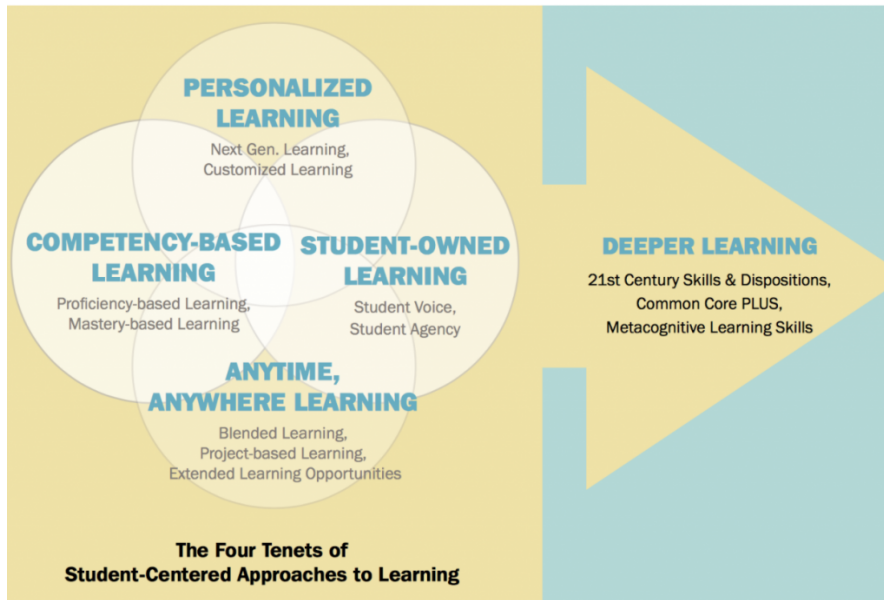
More progressive educational approaches (going back to Dewey), including student-centered learning (#SCL) and project-based learning (#PBL) value student agency and collaboration as learning outcomes. They usually come with a choice of depth over breadth. The outcome framework for **Education Reimagined**, a collaborative of leading advocates and foundations, illustrates the focus on skills and dispositions over content knowledge.

KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	DISPOSITIONS
The theoretical or practical understanding of someone or something.	The capacities and strategies that enable learners to apply knowledge to novel situations, engage in higher order thinking, problem solve, collaborate, communicate effectively, and plan for the future.	The behaviors and ways of being that contribute to learners fulfilling their full potential.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> World class standards Career and technical education Other content areas and essential literacies Global competence Applied knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning how to learn Time/goal management Critical thinking Problem solving Working collaboratively Communicating effectively Metacognition Self/social awareness and empathy Creativity & innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agency (self-efficacy) Curiosity Initiative Resilience Adaptability Persistence Leadership Ethical behavior and civic responsibility Self-control

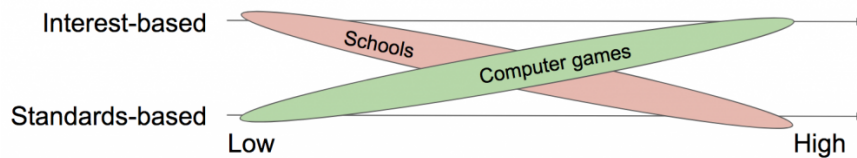
A project-based advocate said, "It's ironic is that a content rich curriculum often implies a didactic approach which probably won't lead to to sustainable content knowledge."

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation framework (below, and central to our **Smart Parents** campaign) not only puts the student in the driver's

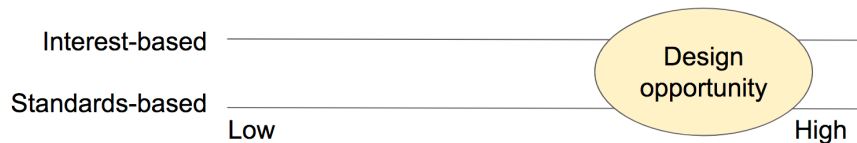
seat, it assumes that students learn anywhere anytime and mark their competency-based progression with demonstrations of learning.



Most computer games are interest-based but not standards-based. Most schools are the opposite.



Combining the benefits of anywhere, anytime interest-driven learning with standards-based learning is the learning design opportunity of our time. With well-designed projects and playlists, we should be able to design pathways that are more engaging, more efficient, and far more flexible than traditional K-12 education.



As more people use the term personalized learning, it's important to be clear about what we mean. Some like Checker value differential pacing and supports while others make room lots of student-directed path variations--it comes down to what you value.

For more, see:

- [What is Curriculum? From Managed Instruction to ...](#)
- [What's Next? Personalized, Project-Based Learning](#)
- [Project or Activity? Project-Based Learning and Cousins](#)
- [Integrated Curriculum: Why It Matters and Where to Find It](#)

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