

COMMENTARY

Is Silicon Valley Standardizing 'Personalized' Learning?**Tech-driven personalization is still a hazy concept****By Natalia Kucirkova**

May 29, 2018

With more than 2 billion monthly active users worldwide, Facebook has an effective monopoly on digital news and information distribution. Any troubling behavior on the site has the power to affect many lives. The recent case of Cambridge **Analytica's mining of Facebook data for political means** is an invasion of personal privacy on a whole new level. But Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's seemingly helpful **support of technology-driven personalized education** represents a different kind of monopolizing threat that we shouldn't overlook.



Personalized learning, or tailoring curricula and instruction to students' academic needs and personal interests, seems to mean a lot to Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan—at least according to their investment moves. More than two years ago, they announced plans to invest hundreds of millions annually in whole-child personalized learning through their limited-liability company, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. Just this month, they **gave \$14 million to support schools in Chicago**, both public and private. And they recently teamed up with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to fund and develop a host of "state of the art" education initiatives, including personalizing math instruction.

They are doing so despite criticism from academic circles that technology-driven personalization undermines teachers' professionalism and promotes specialist over general education. Not to mention, personalized learning is still a hazy concept that means different things to different educators. Though many school leaders see its promise, it's not cheap or easy to implement.

In fact, Silicon Valley's keen interest in shaping the personalized-learning agenda could create a one-sided model that undermines the diverse nature of education.

When done well, personalized learning can empower students to create their own projects and learning paths and provide tailored academic support. In my own work with personalized reading instruction, I have seen its **potential for motivating children to read**.

But sticking commercial technology's heavy hand into the mix concerns me. Tech-based platforms have the potential to standardize learning through a commercialization of knowledge and a product-centric approach to children's education, with no agency or reciprocity for the learner. Schools that are too quick to adopt platforms may hurt their capacity to provide learning experiences that are not technology-mediated, such as outdoor education, physical libraries, or music classes. It's a move away from human-centered teaching and a failure to acknowledge that learning is more than absorbing facts in nice packaging.

"Personalization's code will not be cracked by its current business- and technology-driven approach."

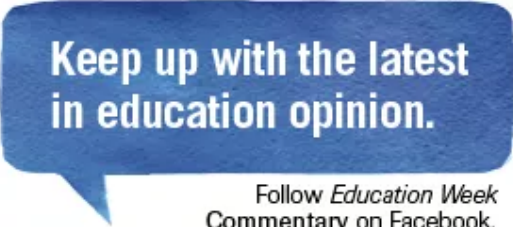
Take Chan Zuckerberg's 2016 \$50 million backing of BYJU's—an India-based math and science-learning platform. BYJU's learning app offers more than 1,000 hours of videos with practice questions and content, but focuses on motivation through preferred learning styles at the expense of classroom debates and face-to-face teaching. And when AltSchool, a private education startup funded by Silicon Valley investors (including the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative), beta-tested personalized education, parents complained their children were treated like guinea pigs.

The current technology-based education models also rely heavily on algorithmic business-minded personalization: the idea that users will buy (or engage with) items that they, or those they know, have engaged with before. However, applying the same logic to education goes against the idea of discovery learning. As the late mathematician Seymour Papert theorized, children learn through mistakes, experimentation, and testing hypotheses. True, our current education system does not always offer children what Papert envisioned. But serving prepackaged content doesn't help students who need open-ended learning spaces where they can explore.

Chan Zuckerberg's approach is not going to solve the long-term ills plaguing public education. Just like personalized marketing narrows the choice of products to buy, so, too, could personalized education narrow children's perspectives to learn. For optimal learning outcomes, the deployment of any technology in schools needs to be guided by personalized pluralization. This approach acknowledges that children's learning needs should not only be tailored to individuals' aspirations, but must also consider multiple perspectives.

If schools are to continue raising caring, creative, confident, and critical thinkers, the personalization algorithms also need to be more transparent, so that educators and families who know students best can edit and adapt their content and delivery. Any collaboration between technology companies and schools should be based on the authentic involvement of family, education, and research communities.

Personalization's code will not be cracked by its current business- and technology-driven approach. Investments—by Chan Zuckerberg or any other funders—need to help optimize the balance between learning for personal interests and the collective good. In its current implementation, the initiative's personalized approach swings the education pendulum toward a faceless extreme.

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Vol. 37, Issue 33, Pages 22-23

Published in Print: May 30, 2018, as **Is Silicon Valley Standardizing Learning?**