

Putting the Person Back in Personalized Learning



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As we heal from a hard year, let's center students' humanity, emotions, and strengths, not tech-driven remediation.

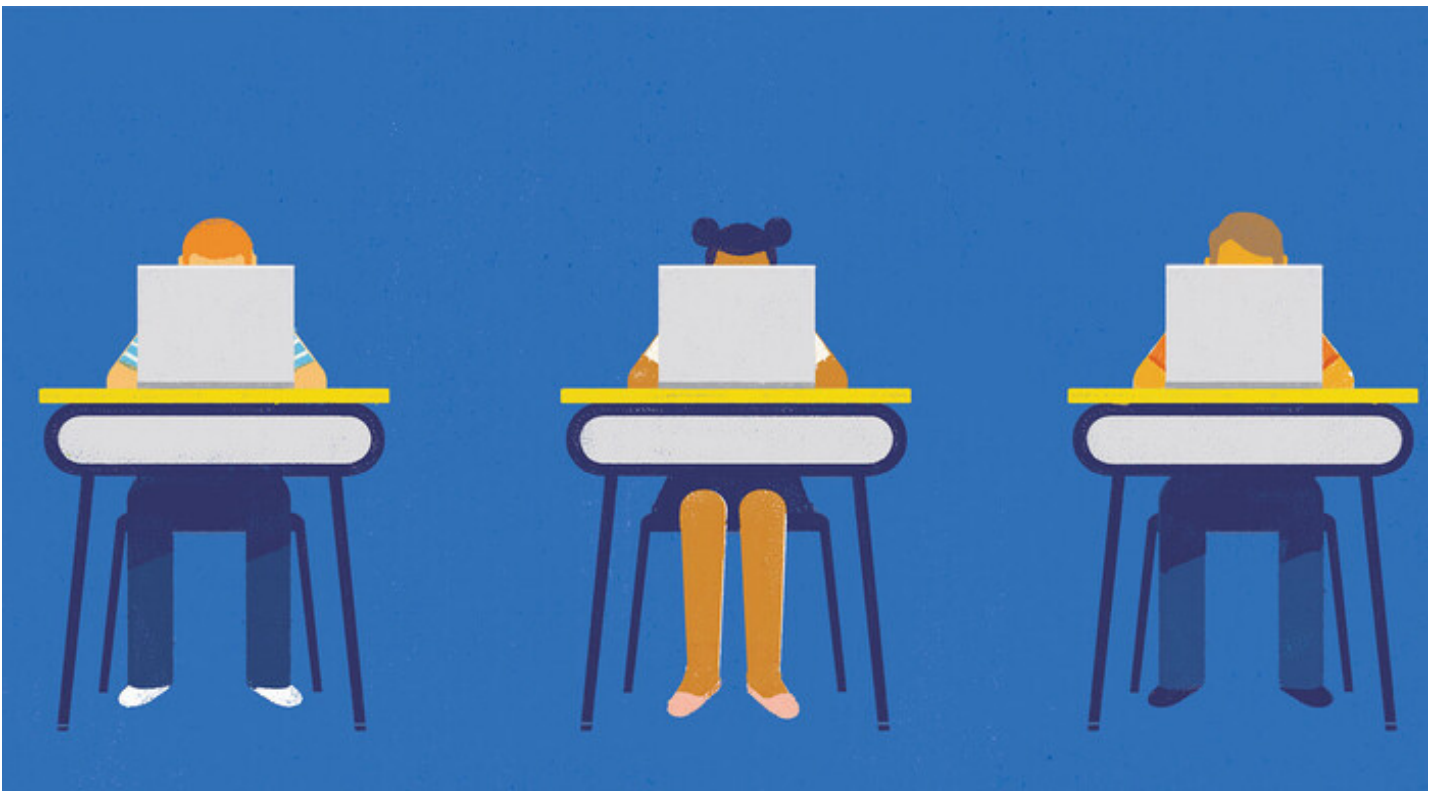


PREMIUM RESOURCE

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

CURRICULUM

TECHNOLOGY



Credit: Chris Gash-TheiSpot

Abstract

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"I don't know how to count by eights, Mr. France," Meg confided as she looked up from her math journal.

This was a familiar dance for Meg and me. She frequently struggled during math workshop, often withdrawing or even crawling under her desk and crying. It took us months to get to a point where Meg felt comfortable confiding something like this in me. I attributed this relative progress to the plan she and I created for when math caused her distress: get a squishy, express your feelings, take a few deep breaths, and find a way to get back in the game.

Today's math task asked all my 3rd graders to find ways to count seven sets of eight donuts, arranged in grids of two-by-four. I hoped this task would lead students toward fluency in single-digit multiplication, albeit in a manner that was inherently personalized, with students choosing their own methods to reach an answer. This method, known as *complex instruction*, was common practice in the independent school in Chicago where I was working at the time.

"Let's start with what you do know how to do," I said gently to Meg, hoping my smile might soften her anxiety. "What do you know that might help you?"

Meg's gaze wandered over my shoulder and toward the ceiling while she thought. "I could count by twos?" she replied.

"Great, let's start there! How might you show this?"

Meg picked up her pencil and started counting by twos, recording each number. She wrote 2, 4, 6, 8, then circled all four digits. She continued—10, 12, 14, 16—and circled those numbers to show she had reached two sets of 8, representing two boxes of 8 donuts.

"I'll come back in a bit to check in," I said to Meg.

When I returned, Meg had made it all the way up to 56. She not only reached an accurate answer, but also created a method from her own thinking—one she could explain and share with the class.

Meg looked up at me with a smile, clearly proud of the work she'd done independently.

"Wow, this is such a great method!" I said. "By circling the groups of numbers, you show that you used twos to count by eights."

I snapped a picture with my smartphone. "Meg," I said, "how do you feel about sharing this method with the class? It might help others learn a new way of thinking."

She beamed. Moments later, her work was projected on the screen for all to see. Meg clearly articulated her method, received a "shout out" from the class, and went back to her seat on the carpet, an integral part of our mathematical community. This was major growth for Meg. And it's the type of growth that a traditional quantitative assessment could never even dream of capturing.

Is a Playlist Personalization?

Just a few years before this lesson, I wouldn't have thought that how I worked with Meg was personalized learning. At that time, I was working for an education technology company and network of for-profit microschoools dedicated to

personalized learning. Our goal was to “help every child reach their full potential,” which we aimed to do through digitized curricular playlists. I was a lead teacher in a multi-age elementary classroom, responsible for doing everything teachers typically do, plus using the digital tools I was helping to build. All students were required to interact with the playlist platform, and teachers created a separate playlist for each learner. The theory was that, by providing each student with an individualized set of activities, curated and delivered digitally, we could meet their needs in a scalable way.

At first, the idea seemed revolutionary. I’d been trying to do this in my classroom for years; in my mind, the more *individualized* a child’s education, the more personalized it would be.

It didn’t take long to become disabused of this notion. At the end of my first year in Silicon Valley, I realized I’d lost touch with my values as a teacher. I hardly recognized my classroom’s atmosphere. Students were turned toward their screens more than toward one another, as we relied on web-based, adaptive tools and packaged online lessons to provide most of the students’ education in math. I began to see that this level of individualization wasn’t actually best for kids. It created silos in the classroom, making collaborative learning challenging. The approach *industrialized* elementary kids’ learning as opposed to humanizing it with dialogue, discourse, and inquiry.

In addition, it was unsustainable. The original idea was that each kid would have their own unique set of activities, but I eventually stopped trying to make this impossible task happen. Creating playlist cards for 12–20 kids daily was a ton of work! And it wasn’t worth it.

Steering Clear of Deficit Messaging

Now, as discussions around “learning loss” are sowing panic in schools, I worry that educators, administrators, and parents across the country will fall into a deficit-based way of thinking. I worry they’ll become vulnerable to the seductive messaging of some education technology companies, a message that conflates personalization with individualization. If we wanted to totally individualize every

student's education, using an algorithm to assign activities individually might help—but is that ideal? Even if we decide it is, using an algorithm and delivering content through customized outputs has a cost. It can be impersonal and dehumanizing. Working on pre-created digital modules focuses on consumption of educational materials instead of meaningful interactions.

Ed-tech messaging often promises the shortest path to the greatest academic gains. But the solutions posed by the education technology industry, by and large, address surface-level challenges related to pedagogy or school structure—without acknowledging that the root cause of these problems is most often systemic inequity. Historically, we've labeled the fact that certain groups of students—usually less well-off ones and/or students of color—in general perform lower academically than other groups as “the achievement gap.” That language focuses on deficits, as does *learning loss*, *acceleration*, or *recovery*; these terms seem to blame students for circumstances our world has thrown at them. They ignore skills students *gained* while living through a global pandemic, like resilience, - adaptability, and maybe empathy.

The mindset that students have lost their place on an academic track distracts us from what really matters in our schools, especially this school year: healing and the humanization of our classrooms.

Favoring Resilience Over Regurgitation

The sheer amount of wealth within the technology sector has allowed it to amass a significant amount of power. Not all of this power is used altruistically when these companies focus on reimagining the school system. Some powerful players in the tech world have learned that the education system provides a steady stream of revenue as schools search for methods to reach all students.

I saw this while working and teaching in Silicon Valley. It was apparent in how we clung to a playlist tool that only made teachers' jobs more complex and unsustainable and created depersonalized learning environments. I think the company's initial intentions were good, but in my estimation, the promise of

monetization—the idea was that the schools would eventually be charged for access to our playlists—led them to fixate on unhelpful tools.



“ Personalization shouldn’t be used to industrialize kids’ learning; it should humanize it through dialogue, discourse, and inquiry.

If we continue to allow technology like this to have outsized influence in schools, we will have another year of kids learning from a computer screen. The fact that many kids were miserable staring at their screens for the last year, craving interactions, isn’t the only reason that would be problematic. Web-based, adaptive tools generally become glorified tracking systems, with students consuming and regurgitating information into a database. They can exacerbate gaps in accessibility to rigorous content by providing “high achieving” students more rigorous content than students who the algorithm determines are learning at “lower levels” receive. This perpetuates discrepancies in access to high-level learning materials.

If I’d applied this method of personalized learning to Meg’s situation, it’s likely that the diagnostic assessment most web-based, adaptive tools use would have placed her well below 3rd grade level. (To add and subtract, Meg had to count up and down by ones; to multiply, she needed concrete tools or written number patterns.) Instead, of grade-level content, the program would have given her content at a - 1st-grade level. Meanwhile, her peers would work with content several grade levels above, isolating her on her first-grade track.

By contrast, my approach to personalizing learning for Meg first addressed the emotional barriers she faced when working in math. I validated her concerns while building her resilience and showed her she had strengths to build upon.

From Digitization to Humanization

We certainly *should* be talking about how to personalize learning in this new era of education. But the path to personalization doesn't necessarily lie in digitized programs that create individualized activity lists of mini-lessons and narrow recall-based activities. The path to personalization lies, instead, in the *humanization* of learning.

Too often, we contextualize conversations around *equity* solely with discussions of standards, assessments, and skills students need to learn. Though it's important to name and measure what we want students to know and be able to do, we can't limit our definition of equity to academic skills. We must remember that learners are emotional and sentient human beings who need love, belonging, and connection to thrive. The aforementioned, industry-scale web-based programs—which I'm certain are being marketed broad-scale to address the issue of “learning loss”—don't provide for these needs. I would argue that they chip away at connection and erode a sense of belonging in classrooms, centering students' academic achievement over their natural right to feel connected to a community of learners.

Here, as an alternative, are three ways to humanize personalized learning:

Center Students' Humanity

We can't help students feel they belong in our classrooms if we don't have a real sense who they are. I suggest starting the year with an identity study, in which students tell stories about their life or family and share pieces of themselves (Ahmed, 2018). Not only will this help *you* get to know them better, it will bond students to one another, creating a community of learners who truly know one another. Moreover, encouraging students to learn about themselves gives each one a handle on their assets, challenges, and goals—which enhances independent learning.

Embrace Complex Instruction

Complex instruction, as defined by researchers Elizabeth Cohen and Rachel Lotan, grounds itself in three criteria: leverage multi-ability curricula; use instructional strategies that foster collaborative learning; and treat problems of status and inequity by ensuring equal access to learning (Cohen & Lotan, 1997).

Complex instruction humanizes personalization because it keeps learners connected to one another, meanwhile differentiating learning through varied access points (France, 2019). Open-ended tasks, like Meg's donut counting, allow for students of varying abilities to apply methods of varying sophistication to tackle the same problem. Meg used a skip-counting strategy; students further along in their understanding of multiplication would have been able to use related multiplication facts like (8×5) and (8×2) to make 56.

Complex instruction is about creating access for all learners—and the good news is that some tech tools can actually help with this. Apps like Seesaw let students demonstrate their learning in various ways, using pictures, images, and even recordings of their work. Tools like Popplet allow students to create mind maps, and BrainingCamp offers every student their own digital math manipulatives.

Teach in Three Dimensions

To make personalized learning sustainable, we must remember that individualization is not the same as personalization. In fact, personalized learning can happen in whole-group, small-group, and individualized instruction; I call these the three dimensions of personalization. In the whole group, we can build a collective consciousness among learners, preserving connection through open-ended tasks and complex instruction. In the second dimension, we create both homogenous and heterogeneous small groups to teach in a more intimate setting. In the third dimension, teachers can provide feedback on learning habits and skills, offering a high degree of personalization while keeping kids connected to whole-class instruction (France, 2019).

Humanizing to Heal

At the end of my school year with Meg, the students were reflecting on their portfolios, which were bursting with work from the year we spent learning together.

“What do you notice about your work?” I asked the class. “How have you changed?”

Meg, now a frequent and enthusiastic participant, raised her hand. “I am really proud of my work now. I look at what I did right before I look at what I did wrong.”

“That’s great news,” I responded. “I’m so happy for you!”

That school year provided Meg much more than tech-driven “personalized learning” ever could. Meg now saw herself as a mathematician; she learned that she had strengths that she could offer our classroom community.

At the end of the day, this is what *personalized learning* is really all about. It’s what we should be centering as we heal from a traumatic year. As we start this new school year, we mustn’t lose sight of the importance of making learning relevant to children’s humanity. We must constantly remind ourselves—even using last year’s pain to help us remember—that the value of meaningful learning lies in the connectedness we feel when we discover new ideas. And not just new ideas about academics, but ideas about ourselves, who we are together, and our collective purpose in this uncertain world.

Reflect & Discuss

France says that individualization of learning is not the same thing as personalization. What do you think he means by that, and how might the distinction apply to instruction in your own school or classroom?

What steps could you take to ensure that personalization builds connections and meaning, rather than fostering siloization and deficit mindsets?

References

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