The Top 5 Reasons Personalized Learning Fails

School districts across the country are embracing the personalized learning trend. The ubiquity and relative low cost of technology, coupled with a desire to create personalized learning environments, has created the space to expand access and boost achievement. However, research is telling two different stories of personalized learning. Some studies indicate that personalized learning is a highly successful model that allows for individualized student success and the potential to close the achievement gap. Yet, other research tells a far more troubling story of failed implementations. At the heart of the problem is definition confusion, a lack of preparedness of learners and teachers, lots of technology distraction, the prohibitive structure of school operations, and digital content overload.

What is Personalization?

First, it's not a new fad, but it is imperative. Since the internet and courseware can deliver adaptive, interactive learning, personalized to a student's identified learning needs, most schools are feeling pressure to use technology to keep up without necessarily understanding what that means for changing practice. In the software field, personalization is the use of algorithms to determine what a student knows and what they need to know and then delivering a custom education path to meet those needs. It means students can explore the subjects and topics they want and then journey through the content and assessments until they are complete. They might even pick out an avatar body with blue hair to represent them in the courseware, just like in consumer online games.

> *" Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel." "*
> *–Socrates*

In this Brief

For schools to survive into the 22nd Century, the distinction between individualized and the definitions of personalized learning just might be the most important concepts to grasp and apply.

Failures are happening when personalized learning is implemented as just an ideal, not a real pedagogy; when schools have unprepared students; when technology is a distraction; when operational structure and design get in the way; and when teachers are experiencing digital content overload. The solutions to these barriers are pointed to so that schools and districts can start their journey to success.

Schools use these technologies to deliver individualized learning plans for students and adjust the learning environment around the needs of students. The core concept is the same, but subtly different in practice. Here is how:

Individualized Learning refers to some alteration in normal teaching to manage a skill-level or learning style, sometimes with a custom schedule that differs from other students in the same cohort. It is also known as differentiated instruction and student-centered learning. It refers to a wide variety of educational programs, learning experiences, instructional approaches, and academic- support strategies that are intended to address the distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations or cultural backgrounds of

individual students or groups. It may be offering supplemental math practice games, reading materials, or remedial lessons. For special needs students, schools produce Individual Education Plans (IEPs). In todays classroom, teachers may create Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs) for all students. These plans vary widely because of available resources. Even with adequate resources, the act of schools individualizing curriculum or providing wholly different custom built lessons is not typically done for all students. Slight alterations and adjustments are the common practice. Into this breach new software systems have arrived that make individualizations at scale more realistic by providing automated programs coupled with adjustments by teachers or administrators.

What is Personalized Learning?

Personalized Learning is:

a. Tech-Side Definition: Learning options delivered and/or selected personally. This is learning in pursuit of an outcome that is personal (e.g., curiosity-based, self-prioritized, etc.) This includes the identification of topics, interest areas, skill gaps, needs and proficiencies. This definition is actualized by highly designed software using animated choices and intelligent learning engines that direct repetition, recommend pathways, and that assess and challenge students while delivering content at diverse levels of skill.

b. Teach-Side Definition: This includes learning "made personal" through the interactions with an instructor, group, peers or the community. It involves fostering meaningful relationships with students, using a relate-able example, supporting students' social emotional learning needs and serving as an authentic facilitator of learning. In these respects, teachers personalize learning by supporting the individual needs of students and fostering an engaged interactive learning environment that stresses application of knowledge.

c. The Combined Outcome: The result is, ideally, a learner who is a critical thinker, literate in both the content and the process of learning. For schools to survive into the 22nd Century, the distinction between individualized and the definitions of personalized learning just might be the most important concepts to grasp and apply. The expectation of society is that technology adjusts all services around them, and it is unlikely the education field will escape this desire unchanged in its practices.

The distinctions between the two sides of personalized learning are further complicated by a range of complex software functions. Navigating these has never been harder, and few schools have the professional development in place to both leverage enhanced technologies while staying true to humanizing learning. "The pedagogy and practice of personalized learning is not new. What *is* new is the rise of adaptive technologies and digital curriculum that allow for real time formative assessments that generate true individualized learning paths, with the potential to reach each student where they are and how they learn best. With this new development, it is critical that we focus not just on the tech, but also the teach," said Robin Gonzales, a former senior executive with Chicago Public Schools, and now Chief Education Officer and founder of Zia Learning in a recent interview.

Most professional leaders are quick to point out that there are multiple factors associated with student success with personalized learning. Ensuring that students learn the required information is certainly one of those factors. How to get to that is far more complicated when teachers are expected to use less traditional lecturing and more screen learning. Teachers often play the critical role of encouragement and persistence, driving social and emotional engagement that many students need — that human definition of personalized which is the reason why we will always need teachers. However, teachers knowing the minute-by-minute expected behavior in a tech-imbued classroom where a lot of autonomous learning is happening, is often mistakenly left out of development plans.

Gonzales, who experienced a district push for personalization and created a Framework for implementation after living through both frustrations and break-out wins, also pointed out that, "It is important to remember that personalizing learning is a pedagogy that predates technology. Ensuring that teachers have both training in the tech and authentic PD for personalization practices is critical."

Personalized Learning Failure Points

1. Implemented as Just an Ideal, not a Pedagogy

To many, personalized learning is a lofty ideal at best, and isn't practical in practice. This can be traced back to the lack of a clear definition. When your teachers and school leaders lack agreed-upon definitions, no clear path of implementation appears. In 2014, the International Association of K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) worked with industry thought partners to create a personalized learning definition. Their definition included four key pillars: "competency- based progression; flexible learning environments; personal learning paths; and learner profiles." While these definitional parts are certainly idealizing new teaching and learning priorities, they aren't laying out any steps as to how a teacher would change practice in their day-to-day activity. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) adopted other ideas, such as "technology-rich curriculum, project-based learning, student voice and choice, and data-driven teaching" that were again idealizing but still not providing concrete practical steps. Still other institutions use the terms "blended learning" and "personalized learning" synonymously.

It's easy to see how an educator may view these with a sense that another fad has arrived, another edict that will add even more to their growing list of teacher duties -- even if they are all great ideals by intelligent people and organizations.

Schools can solve this barrier to attaining personalized learning by agreeing upon both their definitions and goals. A framework such as the Zia Learning Framework for Facilitated Personalized Instruction provides a common language with deep exploration of the pedagogy to help everyone see how daily practice needs to shift. More importantly, it provides practical steps that get teachers eager to implement.

2. Ill-Prepared Students

In 2001, Marc Prensky authored a paper entitled, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants,[2]" in which he coined the term "digital native." Many readers understood the paper to indicate that modern learners already know how to leverage technology as they have grown up

Personalized Learning Failure Points

1. Just an Ideal, not a Pedagogy

Personalized Learning

How to do it? What is it? Definition? No path No path

Solution

| Definitions |
| Goals |
| Plans |
| Step 1 |
| Step 2 |
| Implementation Framework |

2. Ill-Prepared Students

Lack of Time Management, Goal Setting, Pacing, Perserverence, and Autonomous Learning Skills

Solution

Student	Skill steps	Autonomous Digital Learner
My Program		My Goals
My Program		My Goals
My Program		My Goals

3. Technology Distraction

Solution

Comprehensive Professional Development

Professional Development Online

Teacher Collaboration

4. Prohibitive Operational Structure and Design

Social Studies   Science   Math

Math   Science
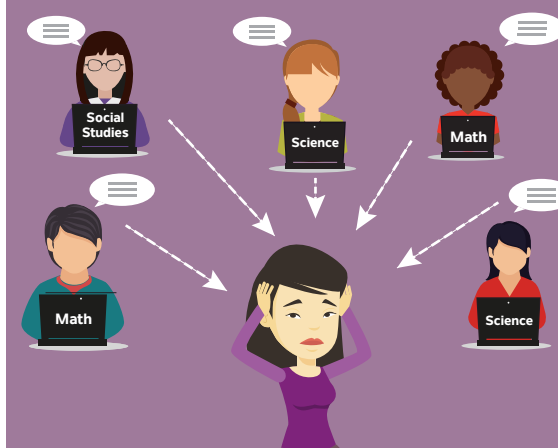
Solution

Flexible and Innovative Learning Environments

Teacher Planning Time

5. Digital Content Overload

Test Test Test

App App App App App App App App App

Lesson Plans Lesson Plans Lesson Plans

Lesson Plan Testing
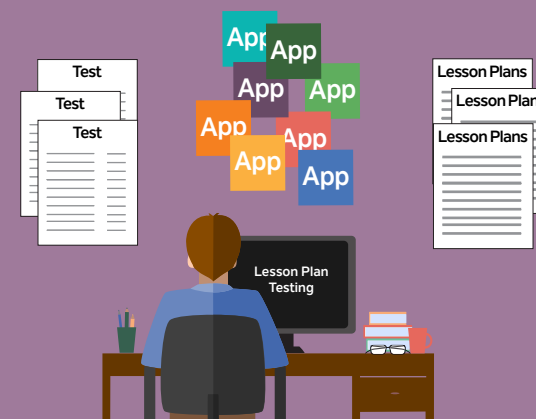
Solution

Careful Curation of Highly Vetted Content

Deliberate intent by the whole enterprise towards goals

with it. It is apparent now that this gross generalization only indicated consumer skills of social media, texting, gaming, surfing and simple device navigation. While these skills are important, they are not quite up to the full self-agency skills needed to navigate through complex systems which have highly nested sub-menu interfaces. Nor do students have the required discernment of value when researching content online. The ability to manage time-on-task is another skill, among others, that students just aren't arriving in schools already knowing.

Schools can solve this barrier with concrete steps to assist students in gaining the necessary skills to be autonomous digital learners. It makes a big difference in personalized learning programs when this is done well. According to Vickie Vallet-McWilliams, Director of Instructional Technology, Pasadena ISD, Texas, "Students are truly owning their own learning, they're coming to school, attendance is higher, discipline is lower, and scores are amazing."

3. Technology Distraction

Teachers often find themselves being rallied to get behind a new device or tech initiative that will "help personalize," rather than being rallied around a new teaching and learning model. Putting attention on new buttons or system navigation, is minimally helpful. Explaining how it helps automate some of the workload and gives the teacher new roles is often a missing step on the way to personalization. Ed-tech blogger Tara García Mathewson said in a Feb. 6, 2017 post, "In the personalized learning world, schools are turning the teacher role on its head, transitioning educators from providers of all knowledge to facilitators of learning. This is a more complex role for teachers, who have to learn new classroom management strategies and relinquish control of instruction."

Another key component in readying teachers to lead this work is that educators need to see examples against non-examples of personalized learning. They need the ability to ask questions and try changes knowing failures will not be disciplined but encouraged as learning moments for them.

Schools can solve this barrier with a comprehensive professional development program and collaboration time carved out for teachers. Leaders that use an implementation framework ensure that personalized learning is embraced first as a teaching and learning methodology that supports sound instructional practices. Technology then becomes the vehicle to deliver that model, rather than an onerous new duty.

4. Prohibitive Operational Structure and Design

New computing devices and desks-on-wheels change little of the existing delivery model, in particular when schedules remain fixed and subjects remain departmentalized. Yet schools implementing personalized learning models are typically telling teachers that they should allow students to work at their own pace and explore topics of individual interest. Teachers are also asked to work across disciplines and grade levels, all while doing a lot more data entry, which can result in a vast increase in work load. Accomplishing this under policies designed for a teacher who works with feisty seven-yearolds all day, or one constrained by the upper school fifty-minute Carnegie unit schedule and the compartmentalized grade and class structure, can be difficult if not

impossible. While a best-case scenario might be to rethink learning design, that is unlikely for most schools in the short-term.

Schools can solve this barrier by at least carving out common planning time. Another step that is easy to do is re-envision library media centers, career and tech centers, and even lunch rooms as learning lounges for student collaboration overseen for a time-block of self-directed learning or group activity. This expands learning beyond the classroom, allows for interdisciplinary learning and fosters teacher and student collaboration throughout the day. Schools can find help and inspiration on policy and design shift from other forward-thinking schools and companies working to help drive personalized learning to a reality.

5. Digital Content Overload

In the 2017 Learning Counsel National Digital Curriculum Strategy Survey of 477 schools and districts the top three issues teachers are presently having nationally are: 1. Too much testing, 2. an unawareness of application and digital content alternatives, and 3. overwhelm in lesson planning using technology.

Today, most teachers are spending significant time searching through thousands of digital options. With more than 7,000 companies in the K12 digital resources field and tens of millions of digital learning objects beyond that, both paid and free, it's easy for teachers to be overwhelmed. Some districts also provide major learning object repositories, which themselves take time to filter through. There is no one answer to choosing good content, and no one answer to who should choose it. Digital security risks, rigor questionability, the issue of type, whether full courseware or chunks of content in document or video form, all make decisions around resources a new complexity.

Schools can solve this barrier as well. Teachers need comprehensive professional development on curating quality digital content that meets the needs of their students. Leaving the world of textbooks for a Wild West of anything goes is a sure way to fail at personalizing learning. A deliberate intent by the whole enterprise towards the goal makes the difference in a license purchasing for all teachers for parts of the curriculum, training on curation for teacher individual lessons or customizations for students, the workload of both administrators and teachers, and how engaging the materials will be for students.

Absent a foundation of digital content, digital instructional design skills, and new roles in a personalized classroom, schools may find that they have replaced the industrial model of education with what Gonzales calls the "KICCC Model," which stands for kids-in-cubicles-clicking-computers, a model she warns against as she urges schools to implement more engaging and authentic learning options. While some teachers may start a digital transition using technology only sparingly, others can go the opposite direction. Entering a virtually silent room of individually isolated students with teachers doing other activities, may indicate that personalization isn't occurring and point to a need for training. "Teachers know they have been freed from day to day content delivery, but they have also been given a heavy task of dealing with daily data and endless content curation. They also now have a new role as facilitator. This is no small shift, and teachers need the right training, tools and support to be successful," according to Gonzales.

"It is important to remember that personalized learning is a pedagogy that predates technology. Ensuring that teachers have both training in the tech and authentic pd for personalization practices is critical."

—Robin Gonzales,
Chief Education Officer
Founder, Zia Learning

In summary, personalized learning holds great potential to positively impact the learner experience. The keys to successful implementation include:

- Providing clear definitions and a framework for implementation and program evaluation.

- Preparing students to be autonomous digital learners.

- Supporting teachers through professional development and maintaining a focus on good teaching, not merely technology.

- Being open to re-thinking school and schedule design, programs and policies.

- Knowing what good digital resources look like and crafting a master curriculum plan, including teacher professional development on digital instructional design. ■

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