

# Ensuring Success in Personalized Learning Implementations

The Top 5 Reasons Personalized Learning Fails  
& How to Fix Them



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## The Top 5 Reasons Personalized Learning Fails (and how to fix them)

School districts across the country are embracing the personalized learning trend. In fact, 97 percent of district leaders surveyed by the Education Week Research Center last year indicated that their districts had invested in some form of personalized learning. 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 and overall confusion around the definitions, teacher role and student readiness for this facilitated approach to autonomous learning.

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**Personalized learning is a pedagogy you implement not a product you purchase**

“Personalized Learning” (PL) has become a catchphrase for an assortment of learning and teaching strategies. Additionally, PL has many different understandings and some would argue no universally accepted definition. In the recently published Personalized Learning Codebook, Alex Sigillo points out that personalized learning has evolved from prior practice stating that “Educators have long worked to tailor learning experiences to students’ unique goals, needs, and abilities. In this effort, they’ve shared a single hopeful objective: to find ways for education to grow in equity and impact. But, at a granular level, how people define personalized learning varies, and how they implement it does, too” (2017).

According to Robin Gonzales, Chief Education Officer and founder of Zia Learning, “the pedagogy and practice of personalized learning is certainly not new. The rise of adaptive technologies and digital curriculum has generated an increased focus on the potential to reach each student where they are and

how they learn best. Rather than seeing the new focus on personalized learning as yet another mandate in a long litany of education theories, it is instead a culmination of decades of research around effective teaching and learning, coupled with technologies that allow for adaptive assessments that generate true individualized learning paths. In this coupling, it is critical that we focus not just on the tech, but also the teach” (Zia Learning, 2017).

The idea of personalized learning has pervaded educator conversations, emboldened by the many new technologies that promise to efficiently distribute lessons customized to individual students. Despite research efforts, adequate funding, and enthusiastic students, teachers, and administrators, there is clear evidence that personalized learning is not the panacea educators had hoped to find. On paper, PL sounds like a perfect solution, but issues frequently arise during the planning and implementation processes (Escueta, Quan, Nickow, & Oreopoulos, 2017).

This paper will provide some context for the various pitfalls that may occur when personalized learning is unleashed on schools without proper planning and a clear framework. In addition, this guide will focus on proven strategies to address these problems and ensure a successful personalized learning program.



## Why Personalized Learning?

There are many reasons to implement personalized learning, including creating a student-centered environment, leveraging 21st century tools to expand teacher reach (Opportunity Culture, 2017), greater student engagement, better teacher morale, and an overall better learning experience. Perhaps the greatest promise of personalized learning is the possibility to eradicate the achievement gap. It is in this area that personalized learning is undergoing critical and crucial examination.

The concept is seemingly simple. Upfront and ongoing assessments can provide information on student performance in real-time. If those assessments are tied to and delivered via a learning management system that provides real-time data on individual student performance, then teachers can know exactly which students need what supports. Take those assessments a step further and create conditional and adaptive release of digital content based on identified learning gaps and that same learning management system can generate a personalized learning path individualized to student need. So what could go wrong?

It is critical for education leaders to remember that there are multiple factors associated with student success. Ensuring that students learn the required information is certainly one of those factors. How to get to that is far more complicated. **There are many social emotional aspects of both teaching and learning that play just as big of a role in education as the subject matter or content being presented in a lesson.** In a personalized learning model, the ideal



is an environment where teachers are freed from front of the room direct instruction to:



Gonzales, author of the Framework for Facilitated Personalized Instruction points out that “it is important to remember that personalized learning is a pedagogy, not a product. It is critical that districts implement a clear framework and implementation plan that takes into account the fundamental changes in teaching and learning in the personalized classroom. This includes teachers moving from direct instruction to a more facilitated approach, and students taking on a more autonomous role in the classroom” (Gonzales, 2017).

Absent a clear understanding of their new role in a personalized classroom, schools may find that they have replaced the industrial model of education with what Gonzales calls the “KICCC Model” (Kids in Cubicles Clicking Computers). “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, endless content curation and a new role of facilitator. This is no small shift, and teachers need the right training, tools and support to be successful.”

Despite many well-intentioned educators and much hard work and planning, PL can fail and when it does, it can be failure of epic proportions. Why with all the funding, research, ubiquitous technology, along with enthusiasm for the concept, does personalized learning go wrong? We've researched implementations across the US and identified the top five reasons why personalized learning may go awry (along with what to do about them).

« Each school will have a unique set of needs along with potential opportunities for innovation. A district-wide model must take those differences into account as they create a scalable model that is both consistent and flexible. »

--Robin Gonzales, Chief Education Officer, Zia Learning

## Why Personalized Learning Goes Wrong

### 1 A lack of clarity around definitions, implementation models, and a clear framework.

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. Organizations such as The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), adopted other ideas including technology-rich curriculum, project-based learning, student voice and choice, and data-driven teaching. Still other institutions use the terms “blended learning” and “personalized learning” synonymously. “Often a lack of clarity on terms such as personalized learning, competency education, and blended learning can negatively impact implementation. If the same words mean different things to different people, confusion and frustration can arise, and this creates a serious problem for schools and leaders” (Abel, 2017). Despite many reputable organizations proposing definitions for personalized learning, there is not one universally accepted understanding. Without a clear definition to guide practitioners, various levels of implementation fidelity exist and consequently, lead to uneven results.

What To Do?



Research is surfacing that reveals the challenges involved in measuring or optimizing for success, when success isn't clearly defined. For schools, if the end goal is unclear, it is difficult to evaluate what elements of the learning experience are contributing to reaching broader goals or preventing success (Bulger, 2016). In order to delineate goals and prescribe a clear plan, educators must first create or agree to a clear working definition.

Gonzales points out that the very nature of personalized learning can lead to varying definitions; after all, personalized learning should be personalized, and thus tailored to individual student needs. This can and should lead to customized implementations that meet the specific needs of schools and districts. A flexible framework is key to ensuring fidelity of implementation, clear understandings, and a common language and definitions while still allowing for individual district, school and classroom needs.

“As you begin implementation of personalized learning at the individual school, it is critical to consider not only vision and goals, but also potential obstacles and challenges. Each school will have a unique set of needs along with potential opportunities for innovation. A district-wide model must take those differences into account as they create a scalable model that is both consistent and flexible” (Zia, 2017).



Once you have a clearly understood definition and defined goals you will need a blueprint or “framework” to help you get where you are going. “A framework such as the [Zia Framework for Facilitated Personalized Instruction](#) provides a common language and common understanding of high quality education experiences in the 21st century personalized classroom. In addition, it gives teachers and administrators clear guidelines and expectations” (Gonzales, 2017).

Establishing a clear definition, process, and framework—agreed to by all stakeholders—are key elements in the overall success of the implementation. Creating a definition including clearly defined goals and measures will place you on the path to success!

## 2 Students have not adequately been prepared for autonomous learning.

In 2001, Marc Prensky authored a paper entitled, *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*. This paper, which would later become a best-selling book, coined the term “digital native”. The paper’s key message surrounds the idea that modern learners, due to their immersion in the digital age, think and process

information differently than their predecessors. However, many readers understood the paper to indicate that modern learners already know how to leverage technology as they have grown up with it. Years later, we now know that is a gross generalization. First and foremost, although students born after 1980 have been surrounded by technology, they tend to utilize it in cursory ways such as Instagram, texting, gaming, and surfing the web. Although those skills are necessary, they do not guarantee that students will inherently know how to leverage technology to enhance their own learning. According to Olson, “Students today are already familiar with the tools themselves....Learning can truly thrive when educators are given the agency to help students use these tools in new, creative, customized ways to support their educational experience” (2017).

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Even if students are led to technology that will enhance their learning, many students do not possess the skills needed to effectively problem-solve, self-motivate, and remain engaged in a personalized learning environment that calls on them to be more autonomous and responsible learners. Mathewson noted that the transition to personalized learning is a complex process that requires much of students. “It also takes more work from students, who have to be engaged participants in every lesson” (2017). How to function in a personalized learning environment must be an explicit part of the teaching.

A comprehensive study of teacher effects on student learning found that autonomous or self-paced learning is a sound ideology but in practice, it places the onus for learning on the student. We know that successful personalized learning solutions depend on autonomous learners and much of the research supports the conclusion that many students do not have those capabilities without direct instruction. Gonzales states that “the personalized classroom calls upon students to regularly employ time

management, self-motivation, goal setting, perseverance and grit, decision making and 21st century communication skills. These skills must be explicitly and regularly taught and supported."

## What To Do?



As with many implementations, there needs to be a plan with concrete steps to assist students in gaining the necessary skills to be autonomous learners. Although this sounds easy, it is actually a big lift that takes time, patience, and repetition. There are two parts to creating a successful student support plan: ensuring students are able to direct their own learning (build agency) and that students have the necessary skills to succeed.

Student agency, as defined by Bandura, "... refers to the quality of students' self-reflective and intentional action and interaction with their environment." (1977) A Harvard study, sponsored by the Raikes Foundation, suggests that learners with high levels of agency take an active response in their learning; they are curious and act with purpose to achieve the conditions they desire in their own and others' lives. "The development of agency may be as important an outcome of schooling as the skills we measure with standardized testing" (Phillips, Rowley, & Friedlander, 2015).

Students need to know far more than basic technology skills. In the information age, they need to understand the process of determining reliable resources, synthesizing information and communicating and collaborating with others in the digital age. Additionally, students need to understand how the class will function, what processes are in place, and what the expectations are.

### **As you begin to craft your plan, be sure to include the following steps:**

- Create a classroom set-up that supports the kind of learning you want to see
- Take into account the specific needs of your learners and create learning opportunities that meet them where they are
- Provide explicit instruction in autonomous learning skills including
  - o Time management and pacing
  - o Motivation, perseverance and goal setting

- o 21st century communication and collaboration
- o Digital literacy and digital citizenship
- o Decision making and self-regulation

- Ensure that all students understand the classroom processes and protocols such as what to do upon entering the room, how to move about the room, how to carry their device safely, how to request assistance, expectations for assignment completion, what to do if they finish work early, etc.
- Lather. Rinse. Repeat. A lot. It will take a lot more time than you may think to thoroughly embed this learning. Be sure that it is practiced daily.



## 3

### **Districts and schools get sidelined by a focus on the technology, instead of the teaching.**

Personalized learning is oftentimes rolled out as a feature of a 1:1 deployment. In that model, districts may begin with the "tech" and then backfill with a pedagogy to support that technology. Teachers may find themselves supporting a tech initiative, rather than using technologies to support a teaching and learning model. Teachers know a shift has occurred, but they may find that their instructional goals and practices are at odds with mandates to "use the new devices." When districts focus on what technology to purchase and then providing training on how to use that technology, teachers are left without a clear understanding of their new role in this classroom. In this mode teachers may find themselves relegated to in-class technology coordinators and monitors of digital learning.

According to Robin Gonzales, Chief Education Officer of Zia learning, "It has been observed that best-practice and successful models have a teacher who not only monitors student work, but also serves as a genuine facilitator of learning" (2017). Teachers across the nation are embracing new roles as facilitators of learning, social-emotional coaches, and designers of the education experience (Zia, 2017). "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" (Mathewson, 2017).

There is not only confusion about what activities and lessons may best support personalized learning but also a more fundamental issue: many teachers are not entirely sure why they are personalizing learning in the first place. In the absence of a clear understanding and without the connections made between the concept, the lessons, and the expected student outcomes, teachers may struggle. Research suggests that professional development programs are key in overcoming personalized learning implementation challenges. “Changing classroom strategy to tailor instruction to student

What To Do.?



needs takes time, resources, and support from school leaders” (Sigillo, 2017). Professional learning needs to be differentiated for teachers in the same way you would differentiate for students. It is not enough to offer a one-size-fits-all model; professional learning must be as engaging and personalized as we would want for our students. Thoughtfully cultivating the use of technology in the classroom by empowering teachers to utilize the tools in ways that support their learners is critical in the transition to a personalized learning environment (Olson, 2017).

Additionally, trust and support from administration in the form of professional development is a critical first step (2017).

Another key component in readying teachers to lead this work is that educators need to see examples (and non-examples) of personalized learning. They need the ability to ask questions and engage in the work without fear of failure. “Consistent with a recent recommendation by the RAND Corporation, districts should ‘provide teachers with time and resources to collaborate and plan on developing curriculum,’ we believe that it is not technology itself, but how technology is cultivated by teachers in a learning environment, that leads to success” (Olson, 2017).

A comprehensive professional development program and clear implementation framework are key to ensuring that personalized learning is embraced first as a teaching and learning methodology that supports sound instructional practices in a personalized model. Technology then becomes the vehicle to deliver that model, rather than the driver of a tech-focused mandate.

Zia Learning is committed to providing teachers the support they need to make the shift to personalized learning...and offers a free and open source framework for facilitated personalized instruction available at [ZiaLearning.com](http://ZiaLearning.com)

## 4 Physical classrooms, schools and policies are not designed for personalized learning.

As much as we would like to think that 21st century schools are vastly different from their 20th and 19th century counterparts, the majority of schools still function with bell schedules, front-of-room facing desks and departmentalized subject instruction. Teachers in personalized learning models are typically told that they should allow students to work at their own pace and explore topics of individual interest. Teachers are asked to work across disciplines and grade levels while creating interest, ability and personalized learning stations. Accomplishing this in a typical classroom under policies designed for 50 minute, highly compartmentalized and subject-specific instruction can be difficult if not impossible. While a best-case scenario might be to completely re-think school design, that is unlikely for most districts in the short-term.

What To Do.?



Until you can quite literally “tear down those walls” you can begin by:

- Fostering a sense of interdisciplinary instruction and allowing for common planning time to ensure that teachers are collaborating on curriculum mapping across subjects and grade levels
- Visiting (physically or virtually) schools that have had the luxury of full-school or classroom redesign and allow for teachers to re-think their spaces and layout
- Re-thinking the instructional day and

teaching or other approaches that allow for learning to go “beyond the bell”

- considering block schedules, team
- Re-envisioning spaces such as your library media center, CTE or technology centers and even your lunchrooms as potential places of collaborative learning
- Revamping old policies that may be barriers to 21st century learning to allow for more flexibility in student demonstration of competency.



## 5 Digital Content Overload

Ten years ago finding digital content may have been the problem. Today, most teachers are spending significant time searching through thousands of digital options. Digital content has become ubiquitous. OERs (Open Education Resources), curriculum vendors, Khan Academy, Hippocampus, teacher-created materials and many more are only a click away. But how do you know if the content is accurate, engaging, and will work with your learners?



There is no “right” answer to choosing good content. Some districts may elect to allow teachers to build all of the digital content/curriculum they will use; other may choose to purchase curriculum from a vendor. Recently, one of the more compelling questions for districts has become, should we build, buy, or curate? The answer to this question is as varied as there are districts and each choice has pros and cons. In some cases, a hybrid of these may also be a good option. One example of hybrid use may be that schools purchase some content or curriculum and then teachers add their own to it. But if you buy or curate, do you need a learning management system (LMS)? If so, which one?

The quality of content or the quality of the platform can also figure into goodness of fit. Many product websites claim to be supported by licensed teachers, eLearning designers or other validated personnel, but the reality is often they are not, and if purchased without rigorous vetting, you may discover that it is not high quality (Guernsey & Levine, 2015).

“Empowering teachers to engage in the development, refinement, and use of digital materials –including lesson plans, videos of instructional practice, and formative assessments – holds real promise for improving student learning experiences and teacher effectiveness” (Setda, 2017).

## What To Do?



Frequently, products “...are not field tested before adoption in schools and offer limited-to-no research on the efficacy of personalized learning systems beyond testimonials and anecdotes” (Bulger).

Whether you create, curate, or decide to purchase content, it is best to provide teachers a starting point of vetted resources and engaging lessons. Teachers will also need comprehensive professional development on

how to curate their own additional content and design impactful lessons from these digital assets. Teachers need both the skills to become curators of high quality digital content as well as a solid foundation on which to build.

Districts may choose a mixed-media approach where some content is purchased and some is OER. This format can work nicely and it doesn't matter if the OER is supplemental to the purchased content or if the purchased content is supplemental to the OER. This offers a good blend of digital content resources and a great amount of flexibility to teachers (Guide to Choosing Digital Content and Curriculum, 2016, p. 14).

The design of digital curriculum is extremely important for engaging learners. Providers/creators need to be deliberate and intentional about how the course narrative is created with the end result being content that is interesting and engaging. Creating content asks a lot of teachers but it might be worth the effort. “Empowering teachers to engage in the development, refinement, and use of digital materials –including lesson plans, videos of instructional practice, and formative assessments – holds real promise for improving student learning experiences and teacher effectiveness” (Setda, 2017).



If content or curriculum is purchased it is critical that the content offer clear alignment to standards and it must be relevant and engaging for learners. The content should have independent research that supports use and takes into consideration diversity, end-user experience, and how students learn. Additionally, the content must look modern and age-appropriate. Page layout, how information is accessed, and visual impact are all part of the learner experience.

**Ask these  questions before purchasing digital content:**

- ? Does the independent research indicate that this product will work with MY students?
- ? Are there other districts using the materials that I can talk to/observe?
- ? Will it work on our network/do we have enough bandwidth?
- ? Is it adaptable for students with special needs?
- ? Does it allow for Lexile scaling of content? (regardless of reading level program adapts to the learner's reading level)
- ? Is there translation software embedded?
- ? Are videos included?
- ? Is it adaptive or responsive (which is needed)?
- ? Are special ancillaries needed?
- ? Is there opportunity for syncing with current grading and student information systems?
- ? Can content be manipulated? Can teachers add or subtract content?
- ? If content is created or curated, who will manage updates, checking broken links and other maintenance?
- ? If purchased what kind of licenses are required?
- ? What are sustaining costs?



In closing, personalized learning still 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 learners.**

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

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

**Knowing what good digital curriculum looks like and empowering your teachers as curators and designers of digital content.**

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