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EDUCATION TRENDS

3 Myths of Personalized Learning

In order to implement and improve personalized learning, we first need to reach agreement about what it is—and what it isn't.

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I've been particularly interested in and concerned about the rise of personalized learning. Interested because, rooted as it is in promising practices, it has the potential to reshape how education is done. And concerned because when an idea becomes popular, it risks also becoming a fad. Many may claim to be implementing something when they

aren't, which harms the idea's reputation—and more importantly, fails to improve student achievement.

Aspects of personalized learning are already being implemented in schools around the world. Competency-based learning, for example, guides schools to set long-term goals in which time is not the driving factor. Flexible seating arrangements allow us to meet the needs of students in environments that are centered around them. And learner profiles—data that communicates how, when, and what students can or want to learn—expand our ability to know our students better and help students know themselves better too.

Since personalized learning runs the risk of becoming a buzzword and of being both oversimplified and mischaracterized, it's important to ensure that we're all on the same page about what it is.

3 MYTHS OF PERSONALIZED LEARNING

1. Technology is the key component of personalized instruction: Many people believe that personalized learning mostly involves students using iPads and technology such as games and software to work at their own pace. They may think students only watch videos from playlists or play games. And some researchers wrongly claim that personalized learning isn't effective because of issues with technology: *A recent report criticized personalized learning* (<https://thejournal.com/articles/2019/01/09/a-personalized-learning-backlash.aspx>) because of its “computer-mediated” instruction.

Yet equating personalized learning with computer- or technology-based instruction is incorrect.

Yes, students may use technology in a personalized learning classroom—they may even be asked to go through a playlist of tools aligned to learning outcomes in order to learn. However, a computer can only do so much.

The teacher plays a critical role in personalized learning. They provide small group instruction as well as whole group instruction when appropriate. They engage students in inquiry activities and engagement techniques to create relevance and excitement to learn.

They support student collaboration and scaffold appropriate skills. They also serve as a sort of coach, supporting students in reflecting on their choices as a way to increase their agency as learners.

These are all critical elements of education that technology cannot provide, and they're just the tip of the iceberg of what a teacher provides in a personalized learning environment.

2. Students predominately do independent work: Another myth about personalized learning is that it is highly individualized to the point where students are always working independently. Students do drive their learning, and it is focused on their individual knowledge. This might lead us to a vision of implementation where students work alone on their learning plan.

While personalized learning does focus on the individual student, it includes the idea that students must master collaborative competencies along with other competencies focused on content and success skills. Students can't meet these collaborative competencies alone, of course—they must demonstrate effective collaboration.

In addition, as students become agents of their learning, their job is to identify different ways to learn as well as different people to learn from—which may include their peers. As students find their passions, they discover they share passions and interests with others in the classroom and form affinity groups to implement group projects and learning experiences. Students also collaborate with different experts in the field as well.

So personalized learning does not mean students working by themselves all the time. Students must work together to meet a core competency of personalized learning, and they may go further and identify ways that learning together is helpful and useful to them.

3. Personalized learning is basically students moving at their own pace: This is a major overgeneralization. As personalized learning is often associated with technology and specifically online learning, many people equate it with students learning at their own pace on their own time. *An article from NPR*

(<https://www.npr.org/2018/11/16/657895964/the-future-of-learning-well-it-s-personal>) notes that some people believe personalized learning is done alone, and that it is more task-based than passion-based. However, students setting their own pace is just one component of personalized learning.

With personalized learning, students demonstrate mastery of content in a competency-based system, but they are highly involved in setting goals connected to those competencies. Instead of students working at their own pace on completely self-imposed goals, they are involved in the planning and learning process as agents in that learning.

Students select their resources and explore different ways to learn in flexible learning spaces. They also connect their learning to their interests and passions, and are allowed voice and choice in how they are assessed. Personalized learning involves self-pacing, but what's more important is that it connects learning to students' passions.

As personalized learning continues to be implemented, it's important that we understand that it is an approach to learning—not a set program. We also need to bear in mind that it is multifaceted and cannot be simplified to either technology in the classroom or individual pacing.

Once we understand this, we can be critical and reflective about its implementation in order to revise and improve it for the benefit of all students. Research that focuses on all aspects of personalized learning is needed to better support student learning.

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