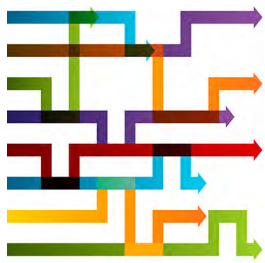# Including the Learner in Personalized Learning

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The Institute @ CESA #1

In the first issue of the *Connect* series, **Competency-based Education: Supporting Personalized Learning**, Janet Twyman (2014) articulately described a variety of emerging and current practices related to competency-based education and how they can support the personalization of learning. Twyman rightly pointed out that "personalization" of just about anything implies recognition of variation and that practices embedded in competency-based education programs "are often crafted at the outset to provide students with individualized learning opportunities." Dr. Twyman also noted that competency-based education programs provide flexibility in time, place and pace and seek to tailor instruction to each student's unique needs and reflect the particular interests of students. Still, the discussion stopped short of being explicit regarding the aspect of personalized learning that the **Institute @ CESA #1**, Wisconsin's education innovation lab, has found to be the most powerful and profound in terms of student learning. This unstated but crucial aspect of truly personalized learning is the supporting of learners to make the transition from a passive recipient of adult instruction to a partner in their learning. This support is key to building learner capacity for sustained, independent learning, the type of learning that can last a lifetime (Rickabaugh, 2012).

When our group of educational leaders in southeastern Wisconsin began the work of redesigning our learning environments in 2010, we quickly determined that the core of this work had to be a focus on learners—understanding their readiness, strengths, needs, and interests, and then creating unique paths for them to follow to achieve standards. We saw this work much like other education reform initiatives in which teachers were expected to learn and apply a set of

strategies to better engage and instruct students. In short, we saw the work of transformation as learner focused, but teacher centric. Instruction was still something we did "to" students, not fundamentally something we do "with" students.

After a year of implementation in a few pilot sites, a key driver emerged from observation and anecdotal evidence. When educators began to invite learners to set learning goals *with* them rather than receive them in the form of a class goal or teacher standard, the magic began to happen. It may seem too simple, but when the work became "learner centric" rather than "learner focused," everything began to change. We have come to understand that the "personal" in "personalized learning" is not just attempting to respond to the uniqueness of learners. This certainly is an important aspect, but the game changer lies in guiding learners to understand that learning in school can be purposeful, valuable, and worth their investment at a much deeper level than typically experienced.

Partnering *with* Students

A significant first step in this process is to explore with learners the purpose or "why" of learning. Once students have a sense for the purpose and utility of what they are about to learn, their motivation, commitment, and persistence begins to grow. Our experience and review of research indicates that there is a connected and powerful strategy to move learners along a progressive path by tapping intrinsic motivation, stimulating active engagement, nurturing a sense of efficacy, encouraging ownership of learning by the student, and finally supporting their independence (Rickabaugh, 2012).[1] In today's world, knowing how to learn makes a more powerful person. It is something others cannot steal, and it is something in which students can take pride in for its own sake, not just to secure the approval or avoid the consequences adults might choose to present, or to get into the right college (Frontier & Rickabaugh, 2014).

We have found the following sequence of activities to be most useful in creating meaningful partnerships with students for their learning:

1. Learners understand and document the purpose and utility of standards they are challenged to achieve.
2. Learners set specific goals to achieve mastery.
3. Learners and educators design a plan complete with activities, resources, experiences and instructional needs to achieve their goals.
4. Learners and educators build a progress monitoring plan to track their journey toward mastery.
5. Learners participate in deciding how they will show or prove that they have learned.

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1   Interestingly, although our initial work was not informed by the recent work of Sam Redding at the Center on Innovations in Learning, these elements align well with four personal competencies that drive mastery as described by Redding:

- Cognitive competency—prior knowledge that facilitates new learning
- Metacognitive competency—self-regulation of learning and use of learning strategies
- Motivational competency—engagement and persistence in pursuit of learning goals
- Social/emotional competency—sense of self-worth, regard for others, and emotional understanding and management to set positive goals and make responsible decisions (Redding, 2014).

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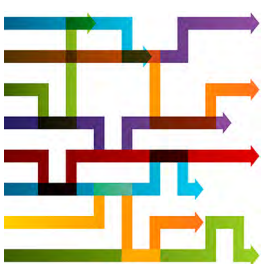
This set of activities strategically positions educators to help students see purpose in their learning and build the strategies and persistence so important to growing efficacy and willingness to take learning risks (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). When a sense of purpose is combined with opportunities to select some of the activities, resources, strategies, and supports that will be a part of their learning journey, learners begin to take greater ownership for and become more proactive in the learning process. The process opens the opportunity to coach students regarding how to construct a manageable and achievable plan of action and identify indicators that will represent learning progress and signal when additional feedback, support, and guidance may be necessary. Finally, when learners are active partners in deciding how learning will be demonstrated, they build a more complete understanding of what it is they are learning (Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, & Turner, 2004).

In addition, the pace of learning tends to increase. In fact, we find that learners tend to finish learning tasks and develop new skills more quickly than in traditional settings. For example, one of the middle schools in our network has gone from very few learners being ready for high school curriculum while still in middle school to dozens of students completing high school courses before transitioning to their freshman year. One of our superintendents, after observing this phenomenon in her school district, commented that she feels as though they had been committing educational malpractice in their work before implementing a personalized learning model.

TRANSITIONING TO NEW PRACTICE

Admittedly, for many students the process described above is new and bewildering. They have experienced school as a compliance-driven, adult-directed, extrinsically motivated experience. Making the shift to a learning experience in which they have real input in their learning path and where they are encouraged and expected to commit to and share leadership for their learning requires some time and support. Not surprisingly, this process typically takes more time for older learners who have more experience in a traditional learning setting and students who have developed the skills and habits necessary to be highly successful in a traditional setting.

Some students even continue to prefer a more traditional, less active role in their learning. A few students resist the transition, but in our experience, the numbers are small and tend to dwindle with experience in a more engaging and influence-filled environment.

From the perspective of educators, we routinely hear teachers comment that their experience with personalized learning has reinvigorated their practice and restored a sense of respect in their work. While their efforts are not any less intense, they see the impact of their work much more clearly and directly. Additionally, we hear from veteran teachers that they cannot imagine themselves returning to the way they used to teach in a traditional classroom setting, and from less experienced teachers we hear excitement and a sense of efficacy that the work they are doing with students is making an important difference in their learning. Admittedly, our work is still early and is not approaching full scale, so we have not encountered significant resistance from teachers who either

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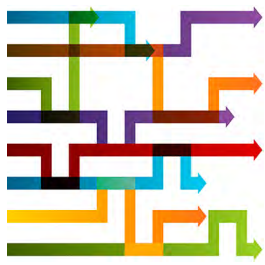
do not believe in or are unwilling to try this approach. However, we have seen very few teachers choose to abandon this approach after committing to try it and giving it time to stabilize and yield results.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND BEHAVIOR

Importantly, our experience has been that students from across the academic performance continuum find this approach to learning to be much more satisfying to them as learners, as measured by classroom surveys and teacher interviews. While the portion of students engaged in this work in southeastern Wisconsin is small in comparison to the full elementary and secondary student population in Southeastern Wisconsin, it includes students from inner-city and suburban schools, from poor and affluent neighborhoods, and from traditionally underperforming and nationally recognized schools.

Scores on traditional achievement measures have jumped in schools across our network, often dramatically. Learners who enter at or below national averages on standardized tests typically show growth at a more rapid rate than the national norming group, often at factors of one and one half to four times. A recent RAND (2014) study of schools receiving Gates Foundation funds to support implementation of personalized learning practices experienced similar increases in standardized test scores among their students.

Beyond test scores, many of our results are anecdotal. However, an emerging partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Madison should soon bring more evidence to the effectiveness of the approach. The schools studied in the *Early Progress: Interim Research on Personalized Learning* (RAND, 2014) share many of the characteristics present in southeastern Wisconsin; in fact, three of their four elements are our three core components: learner profiles, customized learning paths, and proficiency-based progress. What the report indicates has not happened in those schools is a reduction in student behavior issues. Our premise, and what we anticipate will be illuminated with this research, is that the key to a drop in resistant, noncompliant behaviors is bringing the students into the center of the learning process. In fact, schools involved in our network have seen behaviors that require significant discipline interventions drop by as much as 90%. This is true largely due to greater equality in power relationships involving adults and learners. When students are invited to define, choose, and commit to learning goals, paths and activities, they have far fewer reasons to resist or engage in off-task behaviors.

CONCLUSIONS

We need to be sure that when we talk about and engage in the practice of personalized learning that we do not neglect the learners and the powerful role they can and must play if we truly want to transform the experience and outcomes of education. Certainly, the educator must take the first steps in this process. We must be willing to release some of the power and control we have tried to maintain over students and their learning and support learners to make more and more important decisions and build greater ownership for learning outcomes. If we do not, we will once again be attempting to reform education without tapping the most underused resource and powerful driver of learning available: the learner.
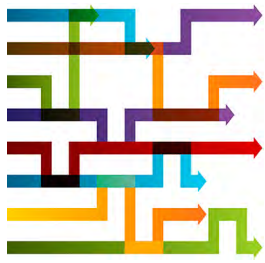
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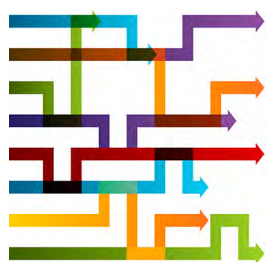
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