



VOICE IN STUDENT-DRIVEN PERSONALIZATION

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OVERVIEW STATEMENT

Student voice is a critical element in implementing student-driven personalized learning. Yet it is one that is often marginalized or ignored. However, if you as a teacher do not understand the many facets of the individual student you are attempting to teach, how can you begin to personalize the experience? When one considers listening to each student's voice to help define their personal learning profiles, the process can seem daunting and time-consuming.

For the teacher who is knowledgeable and sensitive to the many outlets for acknowledging student voice that are available on any given day, the listening process is less daunting. Student-driven personalized learning can be implemented in the classroom by using multiple instructional modes to scaffold each student's learning and enhance the student's motivation to learn. By paying attention to every aspect of each student's learning and development, one can enlist the student in ... accessing rich sources of information. (Murphy et al., 2016)

Student-driven personalization is a critical concept in the pursuit of a personalized learning environment. Individual student performance plays a central role in each student's learning; to make the most of the student as an individual, we need to turn up the volume on student voice so those orchestrating this concept are well aware of the needs, aspirations, and abilities of the recipients of teaching—the students. Ideally, student-driven personalization invites students to play an active role in making decisions regarding their learning choices. How can one find opportunities for self-revelatory processes and activities during the course of a busy school day?

There are many outlets to access student voice for the teacher who is creative and aware of the opportunities. Instructional episodes, when carefully constructed, are one way to provide opportunities for hearing the learner's voice. In this brief, I consider the use of an instructional episode on writing with metaphor as a pathway to student voice.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

The U.S. Department of Education's National Technology Plan (USDOE, 2010) recommends "instruction that is paced to learning needs, tailored to learning preferences . . . and specific interests of different learners" (p. 12). Features of student-driven personalization include variation in time, pace, place, content goals, methods, and learner choice and preferences. For the purposes of this paper, it will focus on student voice as an element of student-driven personalization.

A teacher who knows her or his students' interests and capacities well can allow for more voice and choice (McCann, 2017). The classroom is a fertile environment for encouraging student voice, both as an element of instruction and as a pathway to the students' innermost thoughts and predispositions. One of the goals of learning is to develop self-regulated learners who can make good choices to help master the skills and knowledge they need to succeed. Co-developing instruction with students is an appropriate choice to encourage student voice while maintaining the integrity of the lesson.

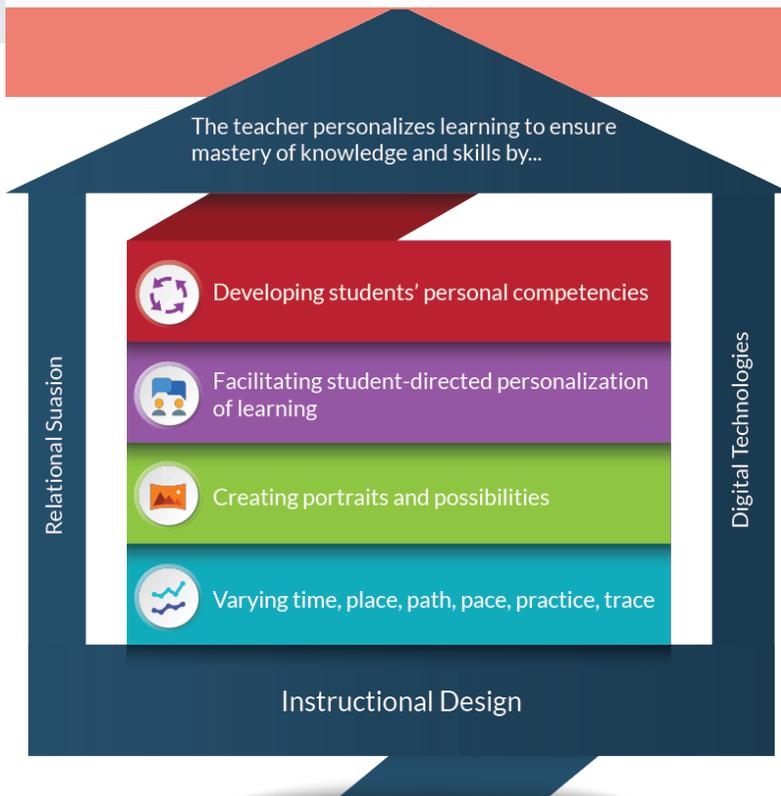
Melinda S. Sota suggests that students be provided opportunities to contribute to their own instruction. Sota defines an instructional episode as "any activity undertaken to reach a learning goal," and encourages us to approach a personalized learning environment as a continuum of choice that can be a framework for including students in the design of their learning (2016, p. 58). Being a part of the planning process is an important aspect in creating participant investment, resulting in development of a growth (vs. fixed) mindset in students (Dweck, 2008). However, learner choice not supported by appropriate skill instruction and the ability to self-regulate will not result in successful outcomes.

A model in which teachers and learners co-design instruction with learners making choices coached by teachers is optimum. Students can thus gain skills and knowledge while developing output that reflects their own personal contribution to the lesson (instructional episode).



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERSONALIZED LEARNING AND STUDENT-DRIVEN PERSONALIZATION

The framework for CIL's definition of personalized learning can be viewed as a metaphoric house, a structure designed to encompass the many elements of a personalized learning strategy. The house is constructed with the foundation of instructional design supported by the load-bearing walls of relational suasion and digital technology and floors as supports for the CIL's Big 4 approach to personalization. When we envision student-driven personalization within the context of the CIL house, we can imagine students occupying the structure and moving between the various floors as they experience an education supported by good design and solid strategies for teaching and learning. Within this design, where is the student voice and choice? While a student journeys through this instructional "house," a well-conceived and well-designed plan to incorporate personalized learning would include her voice, coached by a teacher and grounded in solid practice and knowledge.



An important conduit for student voice in a personalized learning process is an instructional episode in writing. In this process, the students' voices can be heard not only in planning their learning project but also in what the writing itself has to say, or what it reflects back to the reader about the student. Students who are instructed in a practice that encourages attaching and connecting personal meaning to their writing are more likely to be engaged in the writing process (Miller & Meece, 1999). Writers need a variety of ways to negotiate the writing process. Successful writing emerges from a combination of instruction that includes both form and function (Wood & Harmon, 2001; Pasquarelli, 2006).

Suggested Practices and Practical Applications

Students need to be instructed in skills to help them construct meaning from text, increase their analytical ability, and become more engaged in the process of learning as making meaning becomes more under their control (Block, 1993; Wood & Harmon, 2001). Many teachers tend to model forms rather than teach strategies to encourage students to access their own experience and develop their own versions of forms (Hillocks, 2002). In a personalized learning approach, teachers must include student voice in both form and process.



In a study conducted with fifth graders (Murphy, 2007), all students completed the assignment. Although some fulfilled the minimum requirement for the project, most students became personally engaged in the process and began to view themselves as writers and the task (form) as more of an activity and less as an assignment. Fully, two-thirds of the students produced numerous metaphoric poems off the template, many of which—as the two below exemplify—provided insight into their own experiences:

There is a Mourning Dove inside of me . . . a sad, depressed, Mourning Dove. When something isn't going right it flies away . . . my mom telling me my dad is moving out. A swirl of sadness washes upon me, a Weeping Willow is stuck between my eyes.

There is a sloth inside of me, a slow, easy paced, sloth inside of me. Most people think I am slow and powerless, but they don't know me yet.

I have an awesome camouflage effect making me invisible . . . so you can't see me anymore . . .
There is a sloth inside of me.

There is a clear, personal student voice in these examples, as there was in dozens of other poems produced for the study. In the first example, there are a number of metaphors that typify a sense of deep sadness and anxiety in the writer. The reader can almost hear the sad cooing of the dove, who mates for life, a concept that the young writer may or may not be aware of, even with the jarring reference to the dad leaving the writer's home. The willow tree reference is also startling in the image of being impaled with the pliant branches of the tree. Clearly, the writer is conveying a sense of loneliness and helplessness, trapped as s/he may feel in the drama of the home situation. Likewise, in the second author's rendering of the poem, the writer feels powerless and lacking in the energy to face whatever challenges seem to be creating the lethargy s/he is transmitting through the images of the sloth and invisibility.

These instructional episodes successfully elicited and tapped into student voice, both in the process and the content (form) of the results. Writing strategies, when personalized, appeal to the writer's own situation. Situational interest (Reinking & Watkins, 2000) can evolve into personal interest. In the case of this fifth-grade class, students embraced the task and made it their own while simultaneously providing insight into their current states of mind and experiences with their world view, a win-win situation for implementing personalized learning through student-driven personalization.

SUMMARY



One beneficial outcome of a student-driven, personalized approach to learning is the emergence of student voice in the development of learning. When developed and embraced as a component of an instructional episode, the voices of the students can be used as both a vehicle for engaging the students in their own learning and serving as a self-revelatory, metacognitive strategy for learning more about the students themselves as learners.

Strategies to elicit student voice are not limited, of course, to writing and the attendant reading, journaling, blogging, debating, and numerous other literacy-based approaches. There are abundant opportunities with numbers (coding, graphing), art (mapping, painting), music (singing, recording, performing), science (conserving, classifying), and dozens of other domains for accessing both the student as designer and student as represented or producer in the project. Offering students more choices helps them to learn how to fully develop their voices, hone their capacities and interests to co-create, and explore the benefits and gratification of self-discovery (Kalick et al, 2017)

Personalized learning provides an opportunity for students to have ownership and voice in the development of their learning ability, potential, and growth. Teachers must know their students by building and nurturing caring relationships—relational suasion—with their students. Doing so allows teachers to discover students' passions and interests, which then assists in illuminating and enlisting students' choice and voice in their learning pathways and trajectories. There are countless opportunities to achieve success under the broad umbrella of a personalized learning approach.

GLOSSARY

1 Metaphor:

A figure of speech that describes an object or action in a way that isn't literally true but helps explain an idea or make a comparison.

3 Personalized learning:

A teacher's relationships with students and their families and the use of multiple instructional modes to scaffold each student's learning and enhance the student's motivation to learn and metacognitive, social, and emotional competencies to foster self-direction and achieve mastery of knowledge and skills. Personalization ensues from the relationships among teachers and learners and the teacher's orchestration, often in co-design with students, of multiple means for enhancing every aspect of each student's learning and development. Personalized learning varies the time, place, and pace of learning for each student; enlists the student in the creation of learning pathways; and utilizes technology to manage and document the learning process and access rich sources of information.

4 Relational suasion:

the teacher's ability to influence a student's learning, motivation to learn, metacognitive competencies, and social/emotional competencies by virtue of the teacher's personal knowledge of and interaction with the student and the student's family (Redding, 2013).

2 Growth mindset:

Carol Dweck (2008) developed the concept of growth mindset and defines it this way: "In a growth mindset, students understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching and persistence. They don't necessarily think that everyone's the same or anyone can be Einstein, but they that believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it."

5 Student-driven personalization:

Learners are active agents and participants in the process of learning and their own education and are encouraged to bring their voice and choice to decisions concerning their educational experience.

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