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# STUDENTS AT THE CENTER

Personalized Learning  
with Habits of Mind

Foreword by Arthur L. Costa



*For Grant Wiggins*

This work rests on the shoulders of your teachings and how you engaged with us and so many others. Your vitality, intelligence, and joy continue to live in our work every day.

necessary, may no longer be enough. As Andreas Schleicher, Director for the Directorate of Education and Skills for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and development (OECD), notes, “The world economy no longer pays for what people know but for what they can do with what they know” (Big Think, 2014). Accordingly, the content and the disciplines that we traditionally teach must be reframed not only as outcomes but also as opportunities for experiencing, applying, and reflecting on essential dispositions represented in the Habits of Mind: persisting, remaining open to continuous learning, thinking interdependently, thinking flexibly, questioning and problem posing, and so on.

When the teaching of content is repositioned in this way, an array of new and powerful mental models become available. We realize that we must make personalized student self-evaluation as significant an influence as external evaluations have long been. We realize that if students graduate from our schools still dependent upon others to tell them when they are adequate, good, or excellent, then we’ve missed the whole point of what self-directed learning is about. We realize the value of using a feedback spiral as a planning tool and a guide for learning. In the pages ahead, you’ll find many models and examples of teachers shifting the evaluative responsibility to students by co-creating with them an enhanced capacity for self-analysis, self-referencing, and self-modification.

In a sense, all educators are futurists in that we are trying to prepare students for both the present and the ambiguous future that does not yet exist. We need a shared vision of the skills and dispositions that facilitate success across and beyond defined subject areas—a vision that reflects a curriculum of *process* that will support mastery of any content and give students personal practice engaging with complex problems, dilemmas, and conflicts that have no clear or immediate resolution. You’ll find this vision articulated in the pages ahead. And what is most significant about this vision is that it is as important for adults as it is for students.

—Arthur L. Costa  
Granite Bay, California

## Preface

*Personalized learning.* It has become a popular, even jargonized term. If asked, most educators could offer some explanation of what it means to “personalize learning.” In all likelihood, these explanations would differ wildly.

In this book, we hope to contribute some clarity on what personalized learning is, what it can look like in the classroom, and all that it can help students achieve. Although we use the past-tense term *personalized*, we do not mean to imply that the work of personalization is ever truly “complete.” It’s an ongoing process, a paradigm shift to a learner-centered approach to teaching. We delve into not just what it means to personalize students’ learning experiences and how educators can go about this but also why it matters so much that we do.

Our conclusions are based on considerable work in the field. We have the privilege of working with many educators who are struggling to give meaning to and respond to ever-changing targets. Standards: *Which ones are best?* Competencies: *Which ones to prioritize?* Assessments: *Which ones tell the most complete story of student progress and learning?* Legislators: *What story do they want to hear?* Parents: *What do they most want to know and need to know about their children’s education?* Having observed how the shifting responses to those questions cause people to lose their way, we hope to provide a



## **Empowering Students to Find Their Own Way**

The shift from industrialized to personalized is a global one, and it is revolutionizing medicine, journalism, music, television, publishing, politics, and self-expression. Yet in the school environment, life continues to be mostly standardized. We remain in a culture that promotes one curriculum for all, one age group and one grade at a time, and one set of tests to determine learning.

However, the fact is, the more challenging, complex, and uncertain the world becomes, the greater the need for education to transform our ways of customizing learning. We must encourage our students to become problem solvers and creative thinkers. If our students are to be successful, they will need to find work that is as satisfying to the human spirit as it is satisfying economically.

As teachers, we need to design learning experiences that help students get in touch with who they want to be and what they want to accomplish in the world. We must include opportunities for all students to build social capital and develop a voice for interaction with people in power positions. They must learn how to create and use professional networks and develop and promote their innovative ideas. Enter personalized learning.

*Personalized learning* is an umbrella term under which many practices fit, each designed to accelerate student learning by tailoring

instruction to individuals' needs and skills as they go about fulfilling curricular requirements. We believe the scope of personalized learning, as it's presently and generally understood, must expand to allow students opportunities to explore and develop their own passions and interests. One of its aims must be to unleash the power of students' aspirations, which will strengthen their eventual participation in citizenship and the economy. As Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith (2015) have suggested, "The purpose of education is to engage students with their passions and growing sense of purpose, teach them critical skills needed for career and citizenship, and inspire them to do their very best to make their world better."

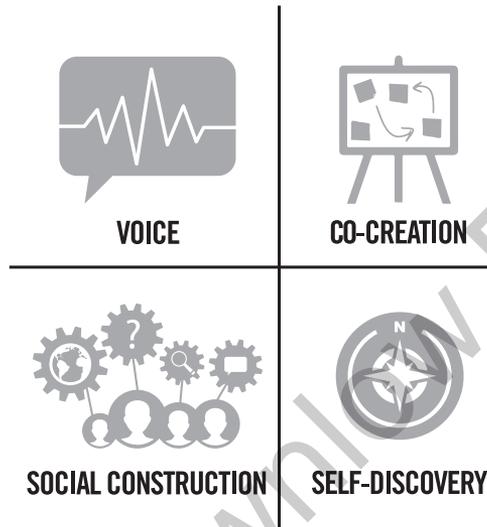
This purpose, however, often remains unfulfilled. Students from even the most privileged schools may suppress their aspirations—their passions and intense interests—because their deepest desires are held captive to the practicality of what others call success. Likewise, students born into poverty may suppress their aspirations because their teachers deem those aspirations impossible to achieve. The promotion of college and career readiness often creates more hurdles for students to overcome as they face the gatekeepers of their future. We believe that the way to help students build the intellectual and social strength of character that everyone needs in the contemporary world is by attending to the dispositions for continuous learning and success through personalized experiences.

In this chapter, we first describe what personalized learning truly is and can be and then turn our attention to the dispositions necessary to bring this model of schooling to life—the Habits of Mind. We show how the fusion of the two provides a framework for creating learning spaces in which students thoughtfully solve problems and invent their own ideas.

## **The Four Attributes of Personalized Learning**

Personalized learning is a progressively student-driven model of education that empowers students to pursue aspirations, investigate problems, design solutions, chase curiosities, and create

performances (Zmuda, Curtis, & Ullman, 2015). There are four defining attributes of personalized learning, each of which can be used as a filter to examine existing classroom practices or construct new ones. These are *voice*, *co-creation*, *social construction*, and *self-discovery*.



### **Voice**

The first defining attribute is *voice*—the student’s involvement and engagement in “the what” and “the how” of learning early in the learning process. Instead of being passengers on the curricular journey that the adults have mapped out, students are valued participants, helping to set the curricular agenda and taking the wheel themselves. Personalized learning encourages students to recognize not just the power of their own ideas but also how their ideas can shift and evolve through exposure to the ideas of others.

### **Co-Creation**

The second attribute is *co-creation*. In personalized learning, students work with the teacher to develop a challenge, problem, or idea; to clarify what is being measured (learning goals); to envision the product or performance (assessment); and to outline an action plan that will result in an outcome that achieves the desired results

(learning actions). Through the regular co-creation personalized learning requires, students flex and build their innovative and creative muscles.

### **Social Construction**

The third attribute of personalized learning is *social construction*, meaning that students build ideas through relationships with others as they theorize and investigate in pursuit of common learning goals. As one of us has written elsewhere, “Vygotsky (1978) refers to the social construction of knowledge—the idea that people learn through dialogue, discussion, building on one another’s ideas. . . . Teaching students to experience these processes help[s] learners to internalize and reshape, or transform, new information” (Kallick & Alcock, 2013, p. 51). There is real power in feeling that you are not alone, in the sense of camaraderie that comes from working collaboratively to effect a change, create a performance, or build a prototype. For students, the experience of individual bits of knowledge, ideas, and actions coalescing into a larger and better whole can be transformative, even magical.

### **Self-Discovery**

The fourth defining attribute of personalized learning is *self-discovery*—the process of students’ coming to understand themselves as learners. They reflect on the development of ideas, skill sets, knowledge, and performances, and this helps them envision what might come next as well as what they might do next, explore next, create next. Our aim is for students to become self-directed learners who know how to manage themselves in a variety of situations. By helping them learn about themselves, we help them build the capacity to make wise decisions and navigate a turbulent and rapidly changing world.

## **A Pause for Clarification: How Do Individualization and Differentiation Differ from Personalized Learning?**

When reflecting on the four attributes of personalized learning, some readers may connect them to other instructional models often referred to as “personalized”—specifically, *individualization* and *differentiation*. Although these models are similar to personalized learning in some respects, there are meaningful distinctions, particularly concerning the nature of the tasks and the level of control students have over the learning experience. Figure 1.1 (see p. 6) shows how the student’s and teacher’s roles evolve from model to model.

### **Individualization**

*Individualization*, as with personalized learning, allows for instructional learning to happen anytime and anyplace. The blended learning approach is a well-known application of individualization. However, in individualization students are always *assigned* the learning tasks, and they go on to use technology, such as computer-adapted models, a software platform, or a teacher-generated playlist, to complete those tasks. Typically, the students control the pace of their learning experience on the road to demonstrating mastery of the material. They can replay videos, do practice problems, answer questions, and receive instant feedback on their work in preparation for a computer- or teacher-generated assessment.

Individualized learning is “personalized” in that it is a way to use the efficiencies of technology to adjust the assignment and pacing to reflect the needs of the learner. There might be an emphasis on students reflecting on their learning and deepening their understanding of how they learn best. However, the relational part of the learning may be overlooked.

FIGURE 1.1  
**The Evolving Roles of Student and Teacher in Three Instructional Models**

MODEL	STUDENT'S ROLE	TEACHER'S ROLE	EXAMPLES
Personalized Learning	Actively pursues authentic, complex problems that inspire <i>co-creation</i> in the inquiry, analysis, and final product and incorporate opportunities for <i>voice, social construction, and self-discovery</i> .	Facilitates learning through questions, conferences, and feedback.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student develops playlists (curation of texts, experiences)</li> <li>• Student leads conferences</li> <li>• Student achieves mastery based on demonstrated ability and performance</li> </ul>
Individualization	Controls the pace of the topic as well as when to demonstrate mastery.	Drives instruction through teacher-created tasks and related lesson plans.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher develops playlists</li> <li>• Khan Academy</li> <li>• Dreambox or Compass Learning</li> </ul>
Differentiation	Selects from a range of content, process, or product options.	Tailors instruction based on individual student needs and preferences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature circles around different texts but on same theme</li> <li>• Student contracts</li> <li>• Choice boards</li> </ul>

Source: From *Learning Personalized: The Evolution of the Contemporary Classroom* (pp. 10–11), by A. Zmuda, G. Curtis, & D. Ullman, 2015, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Copyright 2015 by Jossey-Bass. Adapted with permission.