

HOW TO TEACH **NOW**

Five Keys to Personalized Learning
in the Global Classroom

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Introduction

Over the last four decades, we, Ochan and Bill, have taught children and young adults in the United States, the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. We have worked with student populations that were very diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, linguistic background, socioeconomic status, and religious faith. These students also brought remarkable learning diversity to our classrooms. Some were in the early stages of learning English. Others had learning disabilities, remarkable talents, academic gifts, or attention issues. Many were experiencing profound relocation stress as they moved from country to country and school to school.

More recently, we have devoted our time to the professional learning of teachers in international schools around the world. We have had the pleasure and privilege of working with thousands of teachers in more than 40 countries. From Tashkent to Tianjin, from Siem Reap to São Paulo, all of the teachers we have met enriched our institutes with their unique experiences and backgrounds.

Amazingly, amid all this diversity, a clear pattern has emerged. Irrespective of nationality, culture, religion, gender, or the type of school in which they work, all of the most effective teachers we have met teach with both a local and a global context in mind. They focus on knowing the individual student and personalizing instruction to match that student's needs. At the

same time, they teach in a way that considers the whole diverse community of students and prepares them for living and working in our modern, complicated world. We believe this approach is fast becoming what is needed in schools everywhere.

While international schools have always enrolled students with different racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, globalization and massive immigration trends are making the student populations of nearly every school increasingly diverse. What was once the particular challenge of international school teachers now faces us all. To accommodate the new makeup of classrooms and the disappearing distances between cultures, teachers need to focus on each student's learning needs while simultaneously imparting global competence—the ability to understand other cultures, to respect and appreciate differences, and to move gracefully and graciously between cultures. To see our students succeed, we all must embrace this paradox of personalizing learning in the global classroom.

Before we move on to discussing what personalizing entails, let's first remember the way classrooms used to be and how many of us were taught to think about them and about our students.

THE WAY WE WERE: THE ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL CLASSROOM

Bill entered the teaching profession in the mid-1970s, accepting a job as an English teacher at a high school in a small town north of New York City. The school was located in a solidly blue-collar community, and its enrollment was almost entirely homogeneous. Ninety-nine percent of the students were white, Roman Catholic, and Italian American. There were two African American students in the school, but they were segregated in a special education program and rarely seen. If there were Jewish students, the teachers didn't know about them, and there were certainly no Asian or Latino students. The homogeneity was further exaggerated by the fact that it was the year of the Farrah Fawcett hairdo, which made virtually all the female students look alike.

At the start of the school year, the Italian American principal, who had grown up in the surrounding community, called a faculty meeting and spoke at length about the subculture of the majority of the school's students. The

previous year there had been a number of disciplinary problems, and he was keen not to have them repeated. He explained that students from the local working-class community were used to firm rules and absolute limits. He warned that attempts to negotiate classroom expectations with students would invite disruptive behavior. These students respected strength, the principal stressed, and they would respond poorly to anything they interpreted as weakness or “giving in.”

In many respects, the typical classroom at that school resembled a factory assembly line. Control was external, the classes were often repetitious, and many times skills were taught in isolation. Content coverage prevailed over conceptual understanding. The idea that children might have different learning styles and different combinations of intelligence preferences was still a decade or more in the future. It was a one-size-fits-all learning situation, and if children didn’t learn, the responsibility was placed squarely on their shoulders.

THE WAY WE ARE NOW: TEACHING UNIQUE LEARNERS IN THE GLOBAL CLASSROOM

Our classrooms and professional perspectives have changed a lot since the 1970s—and thank goodness for that! Around the world, seismic demographic shifts have made monocultural enclave schools, such as the one that Bill began teaching in, increasingly rare. Today it is common for neighborhood schools in cities like Boston, Vancouver, London, and Melbourne to have 30 or 40 nationalities represented among their students.

The last 20 years have also changed our understanding of learning and how the brain works. Educators now recognize that students bring to the classroom different learning styles, intelligence preferences, and interests, and the most effective teachers incorporate these factors into their instructional planning.

To help illustrate the new learning dynamics of the global classroom, we would like to introduce you to four students. Although each student’s story is unique, together they represent the types of challenges facing 21st century teachers, who must work to understand all the children they teach,

the complexity of these students' specific cultural backgrounds, and the ways in which they learn.

Rupa: A Success Last Year

Rupa is a very bright girl, or she used to be, when she was a 4th grader in Nairobi, Kenya, and earned straight As. But since Rupa's family moved to the United States six months ago, her school achievement has taken a nosedive. Rupa's parents have visited her teachers almost every other day and are hiring a private tutor for math. Rupa's television and computer privileges have been suspended indefinitely.

Although Rupa is ethnically Indian, she has never lived in India. She was born in Africa but doesn't feel any sense of being Kenyan or African. Her family is Hindu, but because of her education in a Roman Catholic school, she knows more about the catechism than she does the Vedas. Her father and mother retain some ties to their traditional Indian culture, but Western values and commercialism are part of their lives now, too.

Rupa's father owns and runs a successful furniture company, but he doesn't believe that he will be able to afford to send Rupa to an American university. He sees Rupa going to India for university-level study, even though he is aware of how competitive admission to Indian universities can be, and even though Rupa doesn't speak Hindi. The medium of instruction in the convent school she attended in the Nairobi suburbs was English, and the language of the playground was a patois of English, Gujarati, and Kiswahili. The emphasis in her previous school was on rote memory. Her American school demands that she engage in critical thinking. Rupa's teacher expects her to apply knowledge and demonstrate conceptual understanding. All this is new to Rupa, and it baffles her.

Ten-year-old Rupa remembers being a success at school last year and grieves for her past life.

Frank: Culture Shock in the International Baccalaureate

At the conclusion of Frank's valedictory speech, the entire audience at his international school in Tanzania is on its feet. Thunderous applause echoes

through the commencement hall, capturing the enormous pride the school community takes in his accomplishment: a four-year scholarship to Harvard, where he plans to study as a pre-med student.

Frank is a local boy—a scholarship student and the son of two teachers at the Tanzanian government school who would otherwise have never been able to afford the international school fees. The centerpiece of Frank’s valedictory speech addresses the culture shock he experienced when he was first awarded his host-country scholarship . . . and first discovered the difference between studying in a traditional government school and meeting the intellectual demands of his new school’s International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma program.

For the first three or four months I was at this school, I didn’t say a word in class. I was in a state of total confusion and shock. It was as though I’d landed on a different planet. I didn’t understand what the teachers wanted. I was used to a school in which there were right and wrong answers. You were rewarded for right answers and punished for wrong answers. But here, the teachers wanted you to think. They expected you to have ideas. They were interested in your opinions. You were evaluated not on a basis of right and wrong, but on the basis of how well thought out your answers were. If you have never been in a traditional government school, you have no idea of the magnitude of this change! You have no idea how terrifying it is to appear before a teacher who expects you to think. Now, I recognize it as the greatest gift that anyone can ever receive!

May Ling: Multilingual, but Not Making It

Thirteen-year-old May Ling is visibly nervous during the admissions interview at her new school in Kuala Lumpur. She answers questions softly, using single words or short phrases. For most of the time, she scrutinizes her shoes and holds one hand firmly in front of her mouth. She is easily flustered and, at least once, appears on the verge of tears.

Although she has been in an English-language school in Macao for the past five years, the ESL placement-test results included in May Ling’s admissions portfolio put her at Level One—a beginner. At home, May Ling’s Chinese mother speaks to her in Cantonese; her Danish father speaks to her in English.

When May Ling is not so nervous, her social, spoken English seems competent—fluent, even. However, her written work in both English and

Chinese reveals that she is struggling with abstract expression in both languages. The fact is that May Ling doesn't have a strongly developed mother tongue. She is not just wrestling with the acquisition of English; she is wrestling with the *acquisition of language*.

Matt: A Study in Loneliness

Both the middle school counselor and the learning specialist are concerned about Matt. He has had several psycho-educational evaluations and, despite his parents' persistent denials, his learning disability is well documented. He is reading three grade levels below his age group. His handwriting is almost illegible. In a one-to-one situation, Matt can exhibit surprising flashes of insight, and his critical thinking skills can be astute and penetrating. However, in his 7th grade classroom, he is silent and withdrawn.

Matt is an American citizen attending an international school in São Paulo, Brazil. There are 15 nationalities represented in his homeroom, and on the playground, Portuguese is heard as frequently as English. Matt isn't sure how to go about making friends across the various cultural divides, and over the past semester, he has become the target of teasing. A group of children in the 7th grade have taken to calling Matt "retard." This name-calling has extended to graffiti appearing on both Matt's locker and his loose-leaf binder. Unfortunately, Matt's thick prescription glasses and his poor hand-eye coordination add to the impression of general awkwardness.

On one occasion, the learning specialist observed Matt in the cafeteria carrying his tray to a table already occupied by a group of his classmates. When he arrived at the table, his classmates stared at him incredulously. Their body language spoke louder than their unspoken words: *Do you really think you're going to sit with us?* Realizing that he had forgotten a fork and spoon, Matt placed his tray on the table and went back to the serving line. When he returned to the table, all of his classmates had disappeared, as had his tray of food.

PERSONALIZED LEARNING BASICS

What Rupa, Frank, May Ling, and Matt require is a teacher who expects, recognizes, and appreciates student learning differences and incorporates

these differences into instructional planning. There is nothing new or “fad-dish” about personalized learning. In one form or another, it has been with us since the first cave-dwelling Magdalenian mother recognized the differing talents of her brood of children. What *is* new is educators’ concerted and systematic effort to identify and use these differences to maximize children’s learning.

Teachers often have three basic yet important questions about personalized learning. Let’s take them in turn.

What Is the Purpose of Personalized Learning?

Personalized learning is about making the curriculum as attractive and relevant as possible to the widest possible audience. This is accomplished by providing multiple access points to a high-quality curriculum—access points that will entice students with different readiness levels, interests, cultural backgrounds, intelligence preferences, and learning styles. Once students connect with the curriculum, personalized learning aims to keep them engaged, maximizing their understanding and achievement.

Who Is Personalized Learning For?

It’s for students who are culturally diverse, students who are learning English as a second or third language, students with special learning needs, and students with special gifts or talents. In short, personalized learning is for *every* student, and it serves *all* students well.

What Do Teachers Need to Do to Personalize Learning?

In our experience, to effectively personalize learning, teachers need to engage in five ongoing inquiries. We must work to know our students as learners, know ourselves as teachers, know our curriculum, know our assessments, and know our collegial relationships.

Knowing our students as learners entails systematically and deliberately exploring our students’ cultural identities, linguistic backgrounds, family circumstances, learning styles, intelligence preferences, readiness

levels, interests, and many other individual learning traits and then using that information to address specific needs by providing meaningful and appropriately challenging work.

Knowing ourselves as teachers includes probing our own cultural biases and assumptions, discovering our preferences in learning style that may have translated into our preferred and dominant teaching style, and recognizing submerged beliefs and expectations that we have about children in general or about students specifically—all of which should help us to more clearly understand and serve our students.

Knowing our curriculum at a conceptual level means being able to discriminate between content and transferrable concepts. Concepts are overarching and applicable to many areas of specific content, offering flexibility in choosing access points for students with a variety of cultural backgrounds and learning preferences.

Knowing our assessments encompasses selecting and designing tools to match the learning objectives we want to measure, offering students some choice in assessment in order to increase engagement, and bringing students inside the assessment process so that they become the end users of assessment data.

Knowing our collegial relationships involves enlisting the help of other professionals with different experiences, backgrounds, skills, and perspectives to support us in planning how to best serve the diverse needs of our students. Education today is a most complex field. As such, it is absurd and counterproductive for teachers to “go it alone.” The most enlightened schools are promoting coplanning, coteaching, and the collective analysis of student work.

Pursuit of advanced knowledge in all five domains of personalized learning is critical to success. Teachers can fall into focusing on one or two domains, which will limit the effectiveness of instruction. We have created Figure A to show how only exploration of *all five domains* results in the ability to personalize learning.

Most teachers have some knowledge in all areas, but we have chosen the extremes of limited focus to make the relationship between domains clearer. For example, a teacher who knows his students and himself well

FIGURE A
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHER KNOWLEDGE AND PERSONALIZED LEARNING

