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Foreword

By William M. Ferriter

Can I ask you a tough question? How many students in your classrooms are truly satisfied with the learning spaces you have created for them? If your students reflect the national average, the answer is bound to be discouraging. Fewer than four in ten high schoolers report being engaged in their classes, and students often list boredom as the primary reason for dropping out of school (Busteed, 2013). Over 70 percent of students who don't graduate report having lost interest by ninth grade and, worse yet, the majority of dropouts are convinced that motivation is all that prevented them from earning a diploma (Azzam, 2007).

These numbers are troubling for anyone passionate about schools. They indicate systemic failure on the part of practitioners to inspire learners and warn us of the immediate need to transform education—a warning that school leadership expert and series contributor Scott McLeod (2014) issues:

If we truly care about preparing kids for life and work success—we need schools to be different. If economic success increasingly means moving away from routine cognitive work, schools need to also move in that direction. If our analog, ink-on-paper information landscapes outside of school have been superseded by environments that are digital and online and hyperconnected and mobile, our information landscapes inside of school also should reflect those shifts. If our students' extracurricular learning opportunities often are richer and deeper than what they experience in their formal educational settings, it is time for us to catch up.

Scott is right, isn't he? Our schools really do need to catch up if they are going to remain relevant in a world where learning is more important than schooling—and catching up can only start when we are willing to rethink everything. We need to push aside the current norms defining education—that teachers are to govern, direct, and evaluate student work; that mastering content detailed in predetermined curricula is the best indicator of student success; that assessment and remediation are more important than feedback and reflection; that the primary reason for investing in tools and technologies is to improve on existing practices. It's time to implement notions that better reflect the complexity of the world in which we live.

That is the origin of this series. It is my attempt to give a handful of the most progressive educators that I know a forum for detailing what they believe it will take to *make schools different*. Each book encourages readers to question their core beliefs about what teaching and learning look like in action. More important, each title provides readers with practical steps and strategies for reimagining their day-to-day practices. Here's your challenge: no matter how unconventional these ideas, steps, and strategies may seem at first, and no matter how uncomfortable they make you feel, find a way to take action. There is no other way to create the learning spaces that your students deserve.

Introduction

Defining Moments and Defining Terms

We all experience defining moments that fill us with wonder, excitement, joy, or sadness. Those defining moments drive our thinking and form who we are as people, as parents, and as professionals. Adam can pinpoint one of his defining moments. It happened when his son, Michael, started high school. After Michael explained an assignment he was working on, Adam asked *why* he had to do the work. Michael responded with, “I don’t know, Dad. I just go to school, do what they tell me, and come home.”

Stories like these reinforce schools’ need to transform to truly engage students in learning. As muddled as change can feel to educators, one thing remains clear: students will be invested in their learning if we empower them to help design their learning. What is the challenge in this for us educators? Figuring out what happens to systems when students and parents know that there’s more than one path to learning. Before addressing systems, educators must agree on a common language. In this book, that means defining personalized learning. Beyond that, we help you decide how you might best use this book.

Consuming Personalized Content

In 2004, Blockbuster Video was a hub of in-home movie nights (Harress, 2013). Did you load up the car, drive miles to the store, peruse

the aisles to select a video, and bring back the movie you chose? Did you frantically search the return bins looking for a favorite film that wasn't on the shelf? Blockbuster Video was so dominant in the video-renting business it didn't appear that anyone could steal its market share (Harress, 2013). National chains like Hollywood Video and Movie Gallery, and a bevy of local mom-and-pop video shops, tried. They were emulating the same business model Blockbuster had capitalized on.

What toppled the movie-rental monster? DVDs, high-speed internet connections, and the determination of streaming video companies like Netflix (Satell, 2014). Allowing customers to create a queue and receive movies via mail removed the need to drive to the store. Then, Netflix began streaming video. This format became the norm instead of the exception, and Netflix cemented streaming video as its primary viewing model.

When Netflix created original programming and released an entire series at one time (rather than following the traditional industry model of releasing one new episode per week), customers began consuming content in an unprecedented way called *binge watching*. The concept of watching programs whenever you want, wherever you want, and starting at the beginning of the series was one game changer. The other game changer was that Netflix figured out how to recommend content based on your user profile. The company was personalizing your experience.

This is just one example of how quickly society moves from a one-size-fits-all model to a more personalized approach. In fact, people born after 1981 (McCrindle, 2014) have completely different patterns of consuming content compared to their parents and grandparents (Content Science, 2016). Movies aren't the only disrupted medium. In 2006, record labels reported over \$9 billion in CD sales revenue. By 2016, their sales had dropped 84 percent (Russell & Sisario, 2016). Why? Because of streaming music services like Napster, iTunes, Spotify, Pandora Internet Radio, and Amazon Music. Even the devices that we use to consume content have changed, evolving from televisions to portable DVD players, and from record players to Walkmans to CD players to MP3 players. Where are those devices now? They have been pushed aside in favor of tablets and pocket-sized phones. Growing up in a culture with unprecedented

choices leads to students who take personalization for granted. Those born after 1981 want to see opportunities for voice and choice incorporated into their learning at school.

Infrastructure is important in terms of what and how people consume content (Wi-Fi, hot spots proliferation, and higher network speeds, for example), but we argue that it is the innate desire to personalize our experiences that really powers this shift. This innate desire to personalize everything, coupled with a world that makes it possible, drives many conversations. Here's why: although students are comfortable owning the information they consume in their personal lives, they have few opportunities to own anything in school. Want to take advanced Spanish? Sorry. That's not possible given your current schedule and current class offerings. Passionate about studying climate change or the life of Hemingway or computer programming? You'll have to wait. That's covered in another class or another grade level or another year. The truth is that there is a real disconnect between how we consume information and pursue our own passions and interests in and beyond the school-house walls.

Defining Personalized Learning

Personalized learning means students choose their learning resources, design their learning experiences, and have flexibility over how to make their thinking visible. Personalization means specifically “enabling student voice and choice” during mastery (Abel, 2016). A student's interests and needs are foremost—not teacher-driven, rigid curriculum.

What's more, educators ask students during personalized learning to reflect on *how learning happens*. We must ask for their insights on further personalizing our classrooms. Failing to ask means failing to introduce personalized learning at scale. For the purpose of this book, we define *scale* as the intentional expansion of a desired combination of knowledge, dispositions, and skills. Structures and readiness indicators that scale learner voice and choice will positively impact more learners through a systemic shift within and between classroom and school communities.

Well-intentioned vendors and educational bureaucracies often inadequately define, infrequently apply, and dilute opportunities for learners to chart their own paths. Only after thoroughly defining learner voice and choice, as well as distinguishing personalized learning from other frameworks, do we present practical advice to K–12 teachers and district leaders.

Defining Learner Voice and Choice

Clarifying complicated concepts starts with accurately defining key terminology (Schmoker, 2004). We mean the following when we talk about learner voice and choice.

- A *learner* is anyone who engages in learning, regardless of age or role. Teachers are learners too, and authentic student voice and choice can't be empowered until teachers and administrators realize self-efficacy in their own voices and choices. For the adults, professional learning will shift to model the important aspects of voice and choice to support new learning. Everything in this book applies equally to teachers, administrators, and students. All are learners.
- *Voice* is a learner's passionate acquisition and sharing of new learning. Voice isn't necessarily audible. It represents ongoing external and internal dialogues in efforts to create conditions that empower deep learning through inquiry, collaboration, and mistake making. Understanding voice requires frequent practice, clear feedback, curiosity, and courage.
- Learners' decisions, which their individual and collective voices inform, qualify as *choice*. These decisions can be personal and limited to one individual or they can apply to groups of learners who share a common purpose. Voice sparks dialogue and choice signifies every action, small or large, that empowers exploration and creation. Ironically, as students are educated within a traditional school, standardization blunts their capacity for authentic choice (Robinson, 2012).

Students who can guide their own learning are invested. Invested students are engaged and higher achieving (Richmond, 2014). Students *and* teachers deserve this. Providing students with a place to voice their needs and interests, and a place for choice in the process, starts with teachers.

Distinguishing Personalized Learning From Other Frameworks

Many personalized learning definitions circle back and focus on teachers. As much as we believe in teachers as co-creators, many respected sources emphasize the teacher's role—not the student's—in personalizing learning (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014). Until teachers and administrators recognize the real differences among personalized, differentiated, and individualized learning, efforts to truly personalize learning experiences will flounder. Personalization is learner centered; differentiation and individualized learning are teacher centered. Differentiation and individualization require the teacher to provide instruction and set learning goals. Differentiation and individualization build on seat time, as opposed to competency-based learning, which advances based on content mastery (Bray & McClaskey, 2014).

Personalized learning means learners do the following.

- Participate in designing their learning.
- Identify learning plan goals and benchmarks.
- Acquire the skills to select and use the appropriate resources.
- Build a network of peers, experts, and teachers to guide and support their learning.
- Demonstrate content mastery in a competency-based system.
- Become self-directed experts who monitor their own progress and reflect on learning.

This book will give teachers, site leaders, and district teams the tools and resources for personalizing learning and implementing student voice and choice in the classroom and beyond.

Using This Book

Depending on your focus, you might be interested in specific topics. Engage with each section in a personalized way. Chapter 1 explains how to help amplify student voice. Chapter 2 gives teachers tools for empowering student choice. Chapter 3 presents a framework that takes these outcomes to school and district scale. The two former chapters include TED Talks and TEDxYouth Talks presentations because they add the authentic context for why this work is important. We deliberately chose speeches that students gave, because students make it worth engaging in this work. In the epilogue we turn to these experts who share their stories and bring personalized learning to life.

We provide detailed readiness indicators, structures, and data that can support students, classroom educators, and district and site administrators and teams as they collaboratively build systems that promote voice and choice. *Structures* in this context are the resources and tools that help educators realize personalized learning. Readiness indicators correspond to the look-fors that leaders can identify as milestones that measure the impact of these resources and tools. The epilogue reiterates that teachers don't need a districtwide implementation plan to use student voice and choice in the classroom right now.