

# Now Trending: Personalized Learning

*Can a buzzword deliver on its promise?*

by MICHAEL B. HORN

**“PERSONALIZED LEARNING”** is a reliable buzzword in education circles, and right now, its star is rising. Leading foundations, school networks, and nonprofits are putting it front and center in their efforts, and innovation-minded officials in states like Rhode Island are actively promoting it as a strategy for improving student success.

But what, exactly, does “personalized learning” mean? Is personalizing a student’s learning experience always a good thing? And is personalized learning its own worthy goal, or merely one means to achieve a more important end?

## No standard definition

Definitions and frameworks vary widely among prominent players in the personalized learning arena, from the Institute for Personalized Learning to the International Association for K–12 Online Learning, and from the National Education Technology Plan to LEAP Innovations. Some definitions emphasize students having a voice and choice in what they learn, along with customizing how, when, and where they learn it. Other frameworks focus on self-paced learning methods, powered by technology. Still others prescribe that personalized learning must include elements such as competency-based learning or learner profiles.

That lack of clarity is amplified by the schools that tout themselves as models of personalized learning. Some schools that until recently said they did project-based learning have simply renamed their approach “personalized learning” to ride the trend. Others that were focused on blended learning (which often looks quite different from project-based learning programs, even as it may incorporate projects) now say that while they *formerly* did blended learning, they now do personalized learning—an absurd statement, given that blended learning is simply a tool to support personalization at scale.

I believe this wide variation points to the folly in trying to strictly define “personalized learning.” The term is not so much a noun as a verb, not a destination or state of affairs but an active method of educating. In talking about personalized learning, we should specify whether learning is being personalized according to pace, content, style, ability, background knowledge, location, or some other dimension. Then we can understand, with some clarity, how educators are doing personalization, to what degree, and to produce which outcome.

## Assessing a personalized approach

A deeper and more nuanced understanding will also allow us to ask better questions about personalized learning and its impact on students. We can move beyond simply measuring whether “personalization works” and instead focus on observing and measuring how it works best in different circumstances. Although there is considerable support in cognitive science for personalizing along certain dimensions, there is also evidence that personalizing along others doesn’t produce the gains educators think it might.

How educators personalize matters. For example, there is substantial evidence that personalizing instruction according to a student’s preferred “learning style”—such as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic—produces weak effects, at best, relative to following a standard approach. In addition, following an experienced teacher’s lead can be important. An



expert educator can help students master the foundational knowledge they need to think critically about the topics that interest them, even if the students themselves do not know to ask for it.

As such, requiring that instruction follow individual students’ personalized learning plans, as some states do, may be ineffective. Such plans may be vacuous—simple statements of learners’ aspirations for what they want to be when they grow up rather than substantial descriptions of goals and tactics designed to inform day-to-day learning. And students themselves may not be aware of everything they need to be learning. Although the proverbial example of mastering underwater basketweaving may be important somewhere, it’s likely not the most productive personalized pursuit, no matter how much it interests a particular student.

## A means, not the end goal

All of this reminds us that, for whatever its merits, personalization isn’t the end goal. Student success—in which students are able to maximize their potential and participate civically in a vibrant democracy—is.

So how can personalizing learning maximize student success? A new framework from Digital Promise Global called Learner Positioning Systems (LPS) offers an interesting tool. Inspired by global-positioning system technology, the LPS framework helps educators make decisions for individual learners by locating them on a learning journey based on dimensions such as social-emotional learning, general cognition, discipline, and biographical background.

“We have to ask, ‘What exactly are we personalizing and based on what research?’” said Vic Vuchic, the chief innovation officer and executive director of the LPS program at Digital Promise Global. “There is a significant body of research on how kids vary in how they learn best. We need to build on this research and use it to support the development of new models that personalize in ways that represent the full diversity of learners.”

For example, students in a single English classroom may all struggle with content, but for different reasons. Certain students may struggle with basic phonological awareness that stems from a home literacy environment where English is a second language. Others may lack some basic vocabulary words that prevent them from accessing a more complex text.

Still others may have low working memory, which limits their ability to absorb information and execute complex tasks even if they have the requisite background knowledge.

Personalizing the approach for each of these students is critical to unlocking their continued academic growth. Continuing to just build the knowledge of the student with low working memory but strong background knowledge isn’t going to work. Certain close-reading strategies in that instance could be crucial. Asking these students what topics they want to read about, or whether they’d like to listen to audiobooks rather than interact only with texts, or whether they prefer to study complex sentence structures before phonemes, may result in learning that is tailored to their interests but not necessarily to their needs.

Personalized learning is a tactic, an active approach that will defy easy umbrella definitions. Done well, it can empower student success. But not on all dimensions, for all students, in all cases. The buzz may be worthy, but some temperance is advised.

*Michael B. Horn is co-founder of the Clayton Christensen Institute and an executive editor at Education Next.*

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