

# Planning for Personalization

*A standards-based curriculum can be accessible to learners at many different readiness levels. The key is to base it in rich concepts.*

**William Powell  
and Ochan Kusuma-Powell**

Several years ago, we were facilitating a workshop on personalized learning at a large international school in China. The school had spent years developing a standards-based curriculum, including benchmarks for what students should achieve at different grade levels. Teachers had spent considerable time unpacking these benchmarks, and the school had embarked on a comprehensive curriculum-mapping initiative using the latest software.

Just before the coffee break, a clearly frustrated participant raised her hand and offered this comment:

We've just spent two years developing standards and benchmarks for our curriculum. We have standardized our expectations of student achievement at each grade level. And now you want us to personalize learning! You want us to treat each student as a unique learner. Aren't the concepts of a standards-based curriculum and personalized learning mutually exclusive?

We suspect that many teachers around the world wrestle with this question: With the widespread movement toward greater accountability and measureable learning standards, can we still make room for the needs of each individual learner?

As educators who've taught diverse populations in the United States, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, Indonesia, and Malaysia, we believe the answer is *yes*. Under the right conditions, personalized learning and a standards-based curriculum can complement each other rather than exist at odds. Two teacher

actions that foster such powerful integration are developing curricular standards around concepts and recognizing which parts of the curriculum we can—and cannot—personalize.

## **Curriculum: Where the Rubber Meets the Road**

Some of us may remember the tire commercial that included the phrase “where the rubber meets the road.” The expression came to mean a crucial point or defining moment. In the classroom, the rubber meets the road at the moment when the student interacts with the curriculum. As educators, our responsibility is to create conditions for the most meaningful and rich interaction. For this reason, it's less than helpful to think about the curriculum without also thinking about the learner.

**A curriculum without learning standards has neither rigor nor credibility. It virtually ensures confusion and mediocrity.**

In fact, personalized learning and curricular standards and benchmarks are not only complementary, but also mutually dependent. To see why, consider what might happen to one without the presence of the other.

In the absence of a personalized approach to learning, a standards-based curriculum can easily become an overpacked program of content delivery with a narrow focus on high-stakes testing. When we leave the learner out of our planning for instruction, the focus shifts from student learning to accountability and quality control. Carried to an extreme, this emphasis can actually impede student learning—particularly for students who learn differently. No matter how solid and thought provoking the curriculum may be, when the voice of the student is deemphasized or forgotten, learning suffers.



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**Teachers with China's national school system discuss how to personalize learning in a unit.**

Many students will fall short of the standards and their own learning potential (Powell & Kusuma-Powell, 2011).

On the other hand, what would happen to personalized learning if there were no clearly defined standards and benchmarks for achievement? We might see the overly individualized learning programs characteristic of the 1960s (25 lessons for 25 students, with any sense of a learning community diminished) or instruction based only on activities that lack clear learning outcomes. A curriculum without learning standards has neither rigor nor credibility. It virtually ensures confusion and mediocrity.

### **The Shift from Topics to Concepts**

Standards-based curriculums can only be personalized when the learning outcomes are framed as robust, primary *concepts* (Powell & Kusuma-Powell, 2011). In a planning session we once

conducted with a science teacher, the teacher identified butterflies as the focus of her next unit of study. What is important for students to understand about butterflies?, we wanted to know. In the conversation that ensued, the teacher explained that it wasn't really butterflies that she would be teaching, but life cycles. She wanted the students to understand that there were similarities in the development of all living things, and she planned to use butterflies as an example. This teacher had made a crucial shift—from teaching topics to teaching concepts.

Although some teachers already teach at a conceptual level, others still plan instruction around topics, such as green plants, the Industrial Revolution, photosynthesis, percentages, or pollution. These are all important topics, but they are still only topics. As such, they don't contain within them the reason students should study them. When teachers

translate topics into teachable concepts, they embed the rationale for engaging students in learning about that concept. For example, we can reframe the Industrial Revolution as the concept of human progress and ask, Who are the winners and losers of industrialization? We can broaden the topic of pollution into interdependence and ask, What relationships exist between humans and their environment?

Teaching that targets conceptually framed learning standards also provides multiple access points across the readiness continuum. For example, if we ask students, How does the study of a foreign language contribute to a respectful society? a student at a fairly concrete level of thinking might suggest that people can learn basic pleasantries—like *please* and *thank you*—in that language. A more sophisticated thinker might explore how different languages influence the ways people think and construct their values and beliefs. An even more advanced student might make connections between language development and culture.

### **But Which Concepts?**

When we frame learning outcomes as robust conceptual understandings, student learning becomes enduring and transferable—but only if we choose rich concepts. As teachers shift the focus from topics to concepts in curriculum planning, we suggest they test the worthiness of proposed concepts against these filters (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005):

- Does the concept have enduring value beyond the classroom? What value will this understanding have for a child in 20 years? If we struggle to answer this question, the concept or topic may not be worthy of student time. For example, why do we still teach the multiplication and division of fractions when few people ever use this skill?

- Does the concept reside at the heart

of the discipline? For social studies, a primary concept could be that history is an interpretative process, not just the study of past events.

■ Does the content require analysis? This is where the teacher can build in personalized rigor. If students are to translate isolated, fragmented information into personally meaningful knowledge, they must engage in higher-order thinking. Too often, the teacher does all the analysis and presents the results to students.

■ Does it have the potential to engage students? The concept needn't incorporate ready-made student interest. Teachers can increase its relevance by framing essential questions in deliberately provocative ways. A colleague of ours is fond of asking his economics students, When is trash not trash?

The challenge of personalizing learning is growing as classrooms become more culturally diverse. Students across many cultures will recognize primary concepts that have enduring value as worthy of their attention, whereas they may find many topics culturally bound or irrelevant. The Italian Renaissance as a topic may or may not have personal connections for students. If, however, we ask, What makes a renaissance? we are teaching at a conceptual level. We can draw on varied content (such as writing from Elizabethan England or the Harlem Renaissance) that may be more personally meaningful for students.

By teaching concepts that are inviting to students from many backgrounds, we throw lifelines to students confronting units that may be light years away from their immediate concerns. I think of Helaine, a 13-year-old student at the international school in Dar es Salaam. She had been raised in a remote Ugandan village (and spoke only her tribal language, not even the official language of Kiswahili). She had for years been a refugee in her own country, hiding from the horrors of Uganda's civil war. When she came to our school, Helaine refused to make eye contact. Reviewing dates



Workshop participants in Beijing explore what can and can't be personalized in assessments.

and battles of the American Revolution didn't capture Helaine's attention, but exploring the concept *sources of human conflict* made lessons meaningful for her.

Guiding students to seek overarching concepts can also spark a student's unexpected interest. Bonnie had been a responsible student in an 8th grade class in an international school in Malaysia, but she had shown no hint of a passion for economics. But when Bonnie's advanced placement American history teacher assigned the class to compare the Federalist Papers and the New Deal, Bonnie made connections. She broke out of the bus line and ran over to ask her headmaster (who was supposed to know everything), "Did FDR read Hamilton's Federalist Papers? I mean, there's so many similarities between Hamilton's economic plan for the new nation and the New Deal. . . . Maybe it's not so much about economics as it is understanding human nature."

### What Not to Personalize

We frequently conduct special needs audits in international schools. One question we often hear as we work with

teachers in international schools is how to personalize learning when school policies explicitly prohibit teachers from modifying the curriculum. This confusion gets to the heart of what can and can't be personalized in a standards-based curriculum.

### Learning Outcomes

Some aspects of every curriculum are nonnegotiable. For example, every student should be able to write a well-organized expository essay before he or she leaves high school. Other non-negotiables include the skills involved in literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking. And if a student is enrolled in a course that culminates in an external examination, such as an advanced placement course, teachers should under no circumstances jeopardize the student's success on the exam by skipping required content.

As a general rule, don't personalize the desired learning outcomes. These outcomes are our instructional goals and are linked closely to learning standards and grade-level benchmarks. Every student deserves the richness and

stimulation of primary concepts and essential questions.<sup>1</sup> However, we can personalize the knowledge and skills we teach each learner, matching them with student readiness levels.

In one 8th grade humanities class we know of, one of the overarching learning outcomes for students was to compose well-organized, coherent five-paragraph essays. This outcome remained constant for all students. However, the teacher emphasized different skills and expected different levels of complexity in the essays of different students in the class. Of the 100 or so students in these classes, some started the


The student who started the year with problems putting sentences together noted, “I still don’t write as much as the others, but I’m writing more and better than I did in August.”

This was personalized learning in action—taking students from where they are in terms of readiness and moving them toward standards-based learning outcomes in the most engaging, enjoyable way possible.

#### **Evaluation Criteria**

Another question we often hear in professional development workshops is how teachers can personalize learning

students to the same high standards (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). For example, students might demonstrate their understanding of the causes of World War I through an essay, a model, a graphic illustration, or a skit. However, for each of these demonstrations of learning, we should hold students responsible for the same mastery of the enduring understandings (the learning standards). With care, we can construct common rubrics to assess dissimilar performance tasks.

The key to personalized learning, then, is to identify clear and robust learning outcomes that are conceptually based—not stated in terms of specific content or facts—and to personalize the assessment process, but not the evaluation criteria. This approach allows us to put our hand on our heart and state that personalizing learning does not dumb down the curriculum. To the contrary, it makes the curriculum more accessible and engaging. It gives teachers the power to make the intersection of students and curriculum—where the rubber meets the road—an exciting stretch of road. 

<sup>1</sup>The only exception is when a student has a moderate learning disability and is on an individualized education program. It may then be necessary to modify learning outcomes on a case-by-case basis.

#### **References**

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school year as fairly sophisticated writers; they knew about thesis statements and paragraph organization. With these students, the teacher was able to focus on writing good transitions and insightful conclusions. Other students had very different needs. Some needed work on basic organization; others needed to focus on putting together a single coherent paragraph. One student was still wrestling with stringing sentences together.

This teacher not only differentiated her instruction so that all students progressed toward the target appropriately, but she also helped her students reflect powerfully on their learning. She gave them a baseline writing assessment at the start of the school year but didn’t grade this assignment. Five months later, students did a comparable piece of writing. The teacher asked her students to compare the baseline writing assignment with the more recent one and self-assess them against a rubric.

Students also answered a series of metacognitive questions to help them reflect on their development as writers.

and still engage in reliable common assessments. Again, the answer requires that we focus on what we can and cannot personalize.

Our bottom line is that the *form* of assessments can usually be personalized, but the criteria for quality work should not be. We know that the medium in which students work affects the quality of their demonstrated learning. If we’re assessing the conceptual understanding of the origins of World War I and we require a poor writer to compose an essay, that student might experience stress that will negatively influence his or her demonstration of understanding. If we invite that student to demonstrate his or her learning in different ways, we can appeal to the student’s strengths. We should avoid situations in which students put all their attention into the process of production and little into the content itself. (The one exception to this is writing. The only way to assess writing is to have students write.)

However, the criteria we use to evaluate students’ achievement should not be differentiated; we should hold all

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