4 ways to challenge students through personalization

In an ideal world, teachers would have the time and resources to connect one-on-one with every student every day to gauge their progress. Based on that knowledge, they could then develop individualized instruction. With large class sizes and disparate learner needs, however, that's not always feasible.

That doesn't mean that personalization is impossible. By building a strong foundation for student engagement and using proven personalized learning frameworks, educators can create a learning environment that both supports those with skill gaps and challenges those who are ready for more.

While skill gaps are a normal and predictable aspect of learning, school closures and disruptions further increase the need for personalization due to extended time out of the classroom. Those learners need even greater individualized support to regain lost ground and work toward their educational goals.

Key aspects of personalized learning

When we discuss personalized learning, the exact definition varies from educator to educator. What remains the same are the key principles that underlie it. Those include building structures that:

- Cater to the individual motivations, strengths, needs, and goals of a student

- Offer flexibility in the place, pace, and time of learning

- Provide online and blended instruction

- Allow students to monitor and be responsible for their own progress

Getting clear on the characteristics of personalization is a good place to start when making decisions on what it can look like within your learning environment.

The role of student engagement

Students must be engaged in their learning to truly realize the benefits of personalization. Engagement in the classroom manifests in the form of curiosity, motivation, and, ultimately, achievement. It can be broken down into three facets: cognitive (thought-related), behavioral (participation-related), and emotional (reaction-related). Researchers have identified essential elements that drive student engagement.

- **Autonomy.** The level of power or control students have over what they're doing and how they're doing it. For example, having flexibility in how an assignment is delivered (written vs. visual, analog vs. digital).

- **Competence.** Having the required skills to complete an assignment or task. Frustration based on inadequate knowledge is not a good motivator. Building competence requires developing the ability to recognize where weaknesses lie—and that work will lead to improvement.

- **Relatedness.** In the classroom, this means building strong connections with peers and teachers that foster a positive learning environment. It can be accomplished through one-on-ones and peer mentoring.

- **Relevance.** This is perhaps most directly tied to personalization. It's the perception that lessons or topics are interesting and tied to individual goals. Giving students options to choose subject matter or content they connect with so they can build skills contributes to a sense of relevance.

Recognizing the characteristics of student engagement can help pave the way to a successful personalized learning program.

How to make personalization work

Personalization is used not only to help students meet grade-level standards, but also to effectively move them to higher levels by offering attainable, skill-appropriate challenges based on their interests and goals. Here are four personalized learning practices that directly influence student-directed growth.

1. **Learner profiles.** A learner profile is a fundamental tool developed with student input that details their strengths, challenges, aspirations, and talents. Think of it as a highly efficient way for teachers to get to know their students as learners and help determine their readiness. It reveals how students prefer to learn and what motivates them to succeed. It's a great way to create a foundation for meaningful student-teacher connection, nurturing the relatedness element of engagement.

How a learner profile is created and what the final product looks like will vary somewhat from elementary school to middle school to high school. For younger students, the process can be as simple as providing students with a list of questions that gauge their interests, such as:

- What is your favorite movie?

- What are your favorite and least favorite subjects in school?

- How do you like to spend your time after school?

- How do you learn best? By yourself or in a group?

Offering flexible ways to submit the answers—in a Google Doc, by hand on construction paper, or even in a PowerPoint or video—can reveal more about how they like to present information.

Resources exist that older students can complete on their own, such as the Learner Sketch online assessment. Once the learner profile is complete, it can immediately inform instruction and serve as the launchpad for growth.

2. **Personalized learning paths.** Granting students agency to take an active role in their learning is a key factor that contributes to their ability to meet or surpass their growth targets. A personalized learning path or plan is a set of short- and long-term goals that is student driven and

teacher supported. It expands on the learner profile by using past performance data to chart a personal course to achieve those goals, while fulfilling school standards and requirements.

The [Glossary of Educational Reform](#) has identified common tasks students may complete to co-design their paths, such as:

- Describing their college and career aspirations

- Reflecting on their past academic achievements and struggles

- Identifying ways to integrate their personal interests into their education

Personalized learning paths are typically created in middle school and high school. At every level, students should have the freedom to self-select some of the learning experiences they'll use to meet their goals.

3. Project-based learning.
Although project-based learning can be conducted in pairs or groupings, it is a powerful strategy for personalization. Assessment data can be used to find commonalities between students to inform grouping based on what they are

instructionally ready for. One technique is to have a central project that the whole class is working on. Students can be broken into smaller groups based on abilities that will focus on different aspects of the project.

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) has identified [nine steps](#) to guide project-based learning for both teachers and students:

- Provide real-life examples of the type of project to be completed

- Allow students to design how the project will be executed and displayed

- Accumulate and discuss background information for the design

- Develop the criteria for evaluating the project

- Procure the materials needed to complete the project

- Create the project

- Present the project

- Evaluate the project based on agreed-upon criteria

Projects should be tied to a learning objective. Each student will be evaluated based on progress toward

their learning goals, and the results will be used to determine what they are ready to learn next. This process can work for elementary, middle, and high schoolers by creating grade-appropriate projects.

4. Personal learning backpack.

Personalization would be next to impossible if it weren't for technology. A personal learning backpack is a set of tools customized for each learner based on what they need to learn and how they like to learn. The backpack can include online learning content providers like Khan Academy, educational apps like Duolingo, assistive technology like GoodReader, collaboration platforms like Zoom, research tools like Quora, and presentation software like Keynote.

Technology resources become more prevalent in grades 4–12, when students transition from learning to read to reading to learn. Blending technology with in-class instruction gives students control of their pace and path to realize the promise of personalization.

The results of personalized learning

Through these personalization methods, students can empower their own learning based on their strengths, needs, talents, and dreams. They're designed to assist teachers

in streamlining customization, while at the same time building meaningful relationships and driving learner growth. By minimizing the time-scarcity mindset, they create an environment primed for achievement.

Ready to take the next step? See how a research-proven assessment can give educators a reliable starting point for every student.

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