Will Richardson calls this "Beyond Differentiation" in his latest piece over at ASCD called <u>Preparing Students to Learn Without Us</u>, where he states:

> For schools and teachers, it means connecting our expectations to students' passions and interests as learners. That is both a challenge and an opportunity for educators working with 20 or 30 students in a classroom. The reality is that despite having talked about personalized learning for more than a decade, most schools and teachers have been slow to discover its potential through the use of the social web, interactive games, and mobile devices.

Would you agree that our students are coming to us being naturally wired this way? All of this technology (social networking, devices, etc.) is not just part of, or an add-on in our students' world. It **IS** our students' world.

Preparing Students to Learn Without Us
Will Richardson

By pairing personalized learning and technology, a teacher can help students learn what they need to learn through the topics that interest them most.

Here's what I wonder: Can my 12-year-old son Tucker, a kid who lives for anything having to do with basketball, learn just about every math concept he needs to be successful in life in the context of playing the game he loves?

I posed that question on my blog a few months ago, and the post elicited more than 60 responses from readers who connected basketball to the study of bivariate data, complex equations, statistical analysis, slope, variables, predicting outcomes, probability, geometric shapes, mean, median, mode, averages, arc, force, angles, percentages, fractions, linear inequalities, volume, speed, mass, acceleration, and dozens of other concepts that are no doubt part of Tucker's K–12 math curriculum (Richardson, 2010). And when I showed him some of the great ideas that teachers had left on my blog, he lit up. "Really?" he asked. "I could do that?"

Yes, I think he could. That's not to say that he wouldn't need good teachers to help him make sense of those concepts along the way. But now more than ever, Tucker (along with the rest of us) lives in a moment when personalizing the learning experience is not just a possibility—it's almost an expectation. We personalize our playlists through Rhapsody and iTunes, our reading through Amazon and Twitter, and our search results on Google and Bing.

But in the midst of this culture of customization, what about education? Are we personalizing learning for our students in ways that make school more relevant and inspiring? Largely, the answer is no.

Beyond Differentiation

In this era of access, personalizing learning means allowing students to choose their own paths through the curriculum. For schools and teachers, it means connecting our expectations to students' passions and interests as learners. That is both a challenge and an opportunity for educators working with 20 or 30 students in a classroom. The reality is that despite having talked about personalized learning for more than a decade, most schools and teachers have been slow to discover its potential through the use of the social web, interactive games, and mobile devices.

Why? For one thing, schools see the eruption of technologies and environments that allow for personalized learning as a "disruptive innovation," according to Scott McLeod, associate professor of educational leadership at the University of Kentucky (Richardson, 2009). The ability to learn what we want, when we want, with whomever we want as long as we have access creates a huge push against a system of education steeped in time-and-place learning. Notes McLeod,

> Between adaptive software that can present and assess mastery of content, video games and simulations that can engage kids on a different level, and mobile technologies and online environments that allow learning to happen on demand, we need to fundamentally rethink what we do in the classroom with kids. (personal communication, October 1, 2011)

That rethinking revolves around a fundamental question: When we have an easy connection to the people and resources we need to learn whatever and whenever we want, what fundamental changes need to happen in schools to provide students with the skills and experiences they need to do this type of learning well? Or, to put it more succinctly, are we preparing students to learn without us? How can we shift curriculum and pedagogy to more effectively help students form and answer their own questions, develop patience with uncertainty and ambiguity, appreciate and learn from failure, and develop the ability to go deeply into the subjects about which they have a passion to learn?

Charting Their Own Course

At some schools, that shift is beginning to happen. Teachers at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in New Jersey have been moving to a more inquiry-based, personalized approach to learning for the last three years. Instead of working through a one-size-fits-all curriculum, students are allowed to chart their own course to meeting school and state expectations. For English teacher Cathy Stutzman, that means encouraging students to take ownership of their own learning and guiding them to course outcomes in individualized ways.

"We can take what could be very limiting common core requirements and put them in the hands of the students and, in return, they get to demonstrate growth by applying them to activities and assessments that align to their own passions and interests," Stutzman says. "If the teacher and the student are true partners in the learning process, there will be a lot of documentation of progress toward those goals."

That's the new dance that teachers have to learn in order to guide students to success—letting each student create his or her own learning experience yet still meet the expectations of the class, the school, the state, and now, perhaps, the nation. At Hunterdon Central, that starts with students creating their own personalized learning plans with the help of the teacher. Those plans clarify the destination in terms of what objectives the students want to achieve, but the route each student takes to meet those objectives differs. Students may select different books to read, use different media to reflect on their progress, and create a variety of artifacts that bring their learning to life.

In a sample plan, one Hunterdon Central student chose to address four standards in reading, writing, listening, and technology. She decided to show how two or more texts from the same period of British literature treated similar themes. From a long list of selections, she chose "Gunga Din" (1892) by Rudyard Kipling; *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad; and *War of the Worlds* (1898) by H. G. Wells. She then developed several questions to drive her study, such as, How is imperialism defined within the texts? and, Is the colonization of "primitive" societies by advanced societies always exploitation of those cultures? By writing blog posts, she reflected on the reading, debated with classmates, and analyzed poetry and political cartoons from the time period. She also created maps that captured the colonization process. Through these activities, the student aligned her work to the standards she chose.

"It requires a totally different skill set on the teacher's part," Stutzman says. "We have to be comfortable with being uncomfortable, because we don't know the exact direction that a class will go when we walk in. Depending on student questions, reflections, or activities, our plans could quickly morph into something we never dreamed would happen at the outset."

In other words, it's risk and reward. "It's scary not to know exactly where your students will go if their curriculums are potentially different, and it requires a lot of adjusting," Stutzman explains. "But the benefit is that students get to see our genuine reactions to new discoveries as well as to challenges, and they see us model the learning process together." Students understand that there is no one "right" answer that the teacher expects, that there are many answers, and that the teacher and students will likely discover many of these together.

Finding Their Passion

Helping students connect course goals to their own passions is a key ingredient of success. This, too, requires being comfortable with pushing traditional boundaries. Diana Maliszewski, a teacher-librarian and information and communications technology head at MacPhail Elementary School in Toronto, Ontario, tries to give her students a wide berth when it comes to the topics they choose to work within to achieve their learning goals.

In some cases, students have real difficulty identifying what they love, or at least how what they love might work its way into their personal curriculum. Stutzman's colleague at Hunterdon Central, Meg Donhauser, says that her role as a teacher is to help her students see the connection. She does this through probing conversations with students, steering

students to multiple resources that may spark an interest, and encouraging students to collect and share readings they enjoy using Diigo, a social bookmarking tool.

She recalls,

> I had a student last year who had drilled into his personality that all that mattered was getting a scholarship for football and playing professionally. His counselor recommended [that he take] British literature for some reason, and as we talked about a theme he might want to explore, we realized that he should explore the medieval version of a football star—a knight. It then developed into looking at how British literature addresses masculinity; he was really able to reflect on his own ambitions through the literature. Sometimes finding a passion just takes time; for some students, it takes several texts or subjects before they find something that really sparks an interest.

Assessment changes as well. Donhauser says that the emphasis moves to assessing in the moment rather than at the end of a book or unit. "Rather than having a defined product that I receive from 25 students," she says, "I receive 25 individual assignments with their own unique content, insights, and styles." Using Google Docs, students continually update their progress, and she provides regular feedback. Students also give one another feedback on their plans as they go. Everyone follows a rubric that covers such areas as standards, learning outcomes, artifact explanation, blog posts, learning activities, work ethic, and research. Personalized learning like this requires students to reflect deeply on their effort and assess their work and progress, a fundamental part of developing the skills and dispositions to continue learning after the class ends.

The Role of Technology

For Anne Smith, who teaches a course in personal learning networks at Arapahoe High School outside Denver, Colorado, technology facilitates both the learning and the assessment process.

Students keep blogs, which Smith regularly comments on, where they archive their work, reflect on their learning, and connect with potential teachers outside the classroom. Smith uses Google Reader, an RSS feed aggregator, to collect all of her students' posts and support her review process. Students also use podcasts to capture and share presentations they give in class.

Web 2.0 technologies are at the heart of personalization, and not just in the typical Google search sense. By embedding such social web tools as blogs and social bookmarks into the learning culture, both students and teachers can stay organized and focused. For example, students at Hunterdon Central use Google Docs to share their academic plans with teachers and peers, who edit and comment on the plans both in and out of school. Students can connect to the people who have created the resources they are using—the authors, bloggers, videographers, and others who have shared their work online.

For other schools, the "disruptive innovation" comes in the form of technologies that are less social but are highly personalized nonetheless. At the Trinity School outside Atlanta, Georgia, students choose to study one of 23 world languages offered in Rosetta Stone's online classroom. Each student can work through the curriculum at his or her own pace under the guidance of a world languages instructor at the school who may not know the language but who is an expert in facilitating language learning, goal setting, and personalized practice offline. According to teacher Megan Howard, the personalized nature of the program requires teachers "to meet each child where he or she is and differentiate support and curriculum on the basis of language and learning style rather than grouping or whole class. That's a necessary shift in the role of the teacher."

Personalized vs. Personal

Despite the promise of personalizing learning and some teachers' best efforts to give their students more agency in the education process, many educators wonder whether the concept goes far enough in preparing students for the wide array of learning opportunities outside the classroom.

Many educators cite an important difference between "personalized" learning and "personal" learning—the latter connotes a deeper degree of autonomy for the learner. Some, like Stephen Downes, a senior researcher at the National Research Council of Canada and a longtime education blogger, see that as an important distinction. "Autonomy is what

distinguishes between *personal learning*, which we do for ourselves, and *personalized learning*, which is done for us," Downes (2011) tweeted last fall.

Melanie McBride, a Toronto-based educator and researcher with Ryerson University's Experiential Design and Gaming Environments lab, echoes that sentiment.

> Personal and autonomous learning is self-directed and self-selected according to the learner's own needs, preferences, and learning arrangements … Truly autonomous and personal learning means making our own choices about what we wish to play or learn with, whom we wish to learn with or from, where we want to do this learning, when we prefer to learn or play, and how we want to learn. (personal communication, October 3, 2011).

In other words, the truly personal, self-directed learning that we can now pursue in online networks and communities differs substantially from the "personalized" opportunities that some schools are opening up to students. Although it might be an important first step in putting students on a path to a more self-directed, passionate, relevant learning life, it may not bring about the true transformation that many see as the potential of this moment.

It's a potential summed up nicely in the white paper *The Right to Learn* (Anytime Anywhere Learning Foundation, 2011). The authors write,

> We need to shift our thinking from a goal that focuses on the delivery of something—a primary education—to a goal that is about empowering our young people to leverage their innate and natural curiosity to learn whatever and whenever they need to. The goal is about eliminating obstacles to the exercise of this right—whether the obstacle is the structure and scheduling of the school day, the narrow divisions of subject, the arbitrary separation of learners by age, or others—rather than supplying or rearranging resources. (p. 6)

So in the end, I'm not left to wonder whether basketball can serve as an amazing curriculum for Tucker to develop the math skills he needs to make it through life. It can. What I wonder is whether his classrooms and teachers can help him become a passionate, patient, connected learner who is empowered to truly learn whatever and whenever he needs to.

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