

Case Study #1 — So Many Choices, So Little Results

The following represents an experiment done by several ninth grade English teachers in a school district in Connecticut that in their words was an “epic fail.”

A group of English Language Arts teachers decided to personalize learning by having students select any novel to read for a “student choice unit.” They were expected to read the text and then write a reflection statement on why they selected the novel. They were not sure on how to evaluate what they got out of the novel (looking for reading comprehension, interpretation, etc.) so they wrote a generic prompt: literary analysis and how the theme or a character gave insight in their own lives.

While every student was initially excited about the unit, the way students approached the assignment was totally different.

- Some students who were prolific readers asked if they could get credit for a book they already started.
- Some students asked you for recommendations and you offered a really long list to make sure you gave them freedom. You saw a few students pick up one of the first few books and decided that was fine for them. You heard one student say to another — “Not worth the trouble to go through the list. Takes time away from reading and writing the prompt.”
- Some students struggled to find a book that they connected with and a few spent several days starting a book and then deciding it wasn’t for them.

As they settled into their reading assignments (you decided to give them time to read in class), you saw a few students immersed in their texts but most students were not as focused as you might like. Because you were nervous about how they were reading, partway through the unit, you decided to assign a “reading log” to make them more focused. One student muttered under her breath, “I thought this was a time where we wouldn’t have to jump through stupid hoops.”

When the written reflections and literary analyses were due you were unhappy about the superficiality of both the insights and their use of textual evidence. This initial test drive felt like a disaster to you and you are reluctant to provide this opportunity again.

Case Study #2 — Union Confusion

The following is a teacher's reflection on personalized learning in a school district in Wisconsin. The district leadership team (representing both administrators and teachers) is going to have a meeting to discuss the results of the data and determine how to proceed.

It's been three years since those first classrooms began instruction and the phrase "Personalized Learning" entered our district's lexicon. A few weeks ago our teachers' union asked staff to complete a survey and they posed a question surrounding the district's vision for implementing personalized learning.

4) I feel competent and prepared to implement Elmbrook's vision of personalized learning. (304 total)

Strongly Agree 21 10%

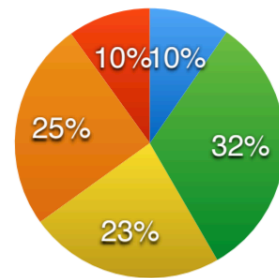
Agree 100 32%

Neutral 74 23%

Disagree 78 25%

Strongly Disagree 31 10%

● Strongly Agree ● Agree ● Neutral
● Disagree ● Strongly Disagree



In addition, to the aggregated results, there were specific comments. These comments helped illuminate the fact that there are some gaps that need to be closed in our staff's understandings the personalized learning framework. As a address some of these comments, it is not to diminish the validity of the statements but to highlight misunderstandings that need to be addressed through communication and professional development.

Comment #1: Vision is not clear, path to get there not clear.

The vision statement pertaining to this goal is to "foster authentic student engagement by connecting students to their learning in meaningful ways to master content and skills, inspire growth and risk-taking, and achieve at the highest level." This is the vision of learning in our district. Our vision as to personalizing learning in the district is to achieve that goal. So, I would argue that the vision of the district is to implement the personalized learning framework in order to reach that goal. Personalized learning is not the vision, it is a methodology to achieve the vision. The path or the framing of what personalized learning is will take us deeper to the heart of the question.

Comment #2: Competent - yes, Prepared – no. We never know the why.

Competent would imply knowledge of the personalized learning framework including the why, what, and how. Prepared would imply having the time to put a plan into place. This led me to question where the disconnect was in the past 3 years as we have had 3 additional cohorts of educators go through the process of designing a proposal for their ideal classroom. The comments some made clarifying their voice helped clarify this divide.

Comment #3: Agree, but need the time.

Every teacher in the district has a different experience with PD related to personalized learning. There are those who went through the first cohort in 2013. Over three years later, there are educators in the district who may never have received focused training to define what personalized learning is. Yet, all teaching staff in the district are required to complete and implement a personalized learning plan this year. So, even among those who believe they are competent in their understanding of personalized learning, they have not received the required time/training to be able to personalize learning in their classroom.

Comment #4: Agree, but not always feeling supported with the vision.

Now this is really tough to hear. Why would any educator take a risk if they didn't feel like they were in a supportive environment? Much like we need a classroom environment that supports student risk-taking, the same needs to be true for educators. Personalized learning begins with teachers choosing to bring change to their classrooms and feel that they are being supported. Sometimes that support is simply a compliment from an administrator. Some of the best support I have received advancing my risk-taking was the ability to take a day to visit other classrooms outside of my building. This requires communication to staff that this type of professional development is valuable and supported. Teachers don't like spending time away from their classrooms or losing prep time. But, knowing that they building administration is open to teachers taking on this professional field trip is important. But again, support can simply be the time to spend finding ways to personalize instruction in the classrooms.

Comment #5: I can't really agree with some of the aspects of Personalized Learning.

This is really a brave statement. Many times teachers will simply accept what is passed down from administration and implement it because that is what is being asked of them. How is this any different than the compliant student doing what is being asked of them because the grade is what matters most?

I would be surprised to find any teacher who would not want every student to find an authentic connections to the content, skill, or habit of mind they are being asked to demonstrate in the classroom. What I do see a lot of resistance to is the idea of proficiency-based progress and what it entails. Specifically, a major sticking point is flexible time and pace. As educators, we feel like we are doing our students a great disservice by allowing them to miss deadlines without any form of penalty. We have many students who take advantage of this and let assignments lapse and pile up. I think this requires a greater redesign of what is “due” and what it means to not meet a deadline. This is a bigger can of worms than I should open here. But, personalizing learning doesn’t mean that everyone needs to do the same work to demonstrate mastery.

Comment #6: I feel competent and prepared for Personalized Learning but the district is not equipped with the money necessary to implement.

If there was one comment that caused me the most distress, it was this one. It clearly demonstrates a failure to communicate the fundamental principles of personalizing learning. It is not about money at all — you don’t need to purchase special furniture or software platforms to do it. It starts with the students.

Case Study #3

Leading personalized learning at a school or district level is no easy feat. It brings up lots of uncomfortable worries that can potentially dismantle what traditional school looks like. This is a chart from a group of educators (teachers and administrators) who liked the idea of personalized learning but raised some serious concerns that needed to be addressed before moving forward.

Accountability Worries	Stakeholder Worries
Assessment	Staff who are not creative
Curriculum pacing	Staff who are set in their ways
Rubrics use and translation to marks/scores	Teacher/student respect
Whole class instruction vs. other – managing lots of projects at the same time	Students need supports if they don't have necessary skills to be independent
Schedule needs to be more flexible to make this possible	Student buy in/participation
Grading practices and current system	Concern with people (student, admin, teacher) ability to allow students to make choices even if that choice is not to participate in the way we want them to
Finding the time to make learning personal while fulfilling our curriculum needs and keeping it all common in the department	Scared to let go
Time to think/plan this way	Not being supported
Time to effectively collaborate with my colleagues	Worried about supporting students and meeting their needs
How to personalize learning and standardize assessment of that learning (collecting common data points)	Doing it with fidelity
Accountability – AP Scores, grades, parents, SBAC, college acceptances	Getting students to care about themselves and the world around them
Ensuring all 125 students are meeting standards	Convincing student that their voice and opinion matters
	How to motivate students who are not intrinsically motivated
	Need a clear picture of where my administrator(s) want me to go with this. Really, really need that. A clear picture of what they want the outcome to be.
	Push back of change
	Parent and student buy in is easier said than done
	Making this work with the current aspects of our courses that are required (common assessments, rubrics