

What Personalized Learning Really Is

Excerpted from ebook “How to Leverage Personalized Learning” By Allison Zmuda and Jill Thompson

The heart of personalized learning is personal — knowing the person in front of you and expecting the best of them. We believe students crave a personalized learning environment. They aspire to engage in interesting, relevant, rigorous, and important work regardless of age, past successes, and failures. Let’s start with a basic definition drafted by Zmuda, Curtis, and Ullman (*Learning Personalized*, 2015) and expound from there.

*“Personalized learning is a **progressively student-driven model** where students **deeply engage in meaningful, authentic, and rigorous challenges** to demonstrate **desired outcomes**.”*

- **Progressively student-driven model** has two connotations. The first pays homage to timeless pedagogy of gradual release of responsibility (“I do, you watch ...”) where the teacher continues to model and coach. This runs counter to a typical misunderstanding where students have free reign to choose what they want to learn and how they want to learn it with minimal guidance or parameters. The second connotation describes the slow pivot school bureaucracies make as they reimagine structures, practices, policies and shifts with their communities instead of imposing from the top down.
- **Deep engagement** in challenges that ideally meet three criteria of being **meaningful** (it means something to me), **authentic** (I can see illustrative examples of what it looks like outside of school and potential impact), and **rigorous** (This challenge pushes me to deepen my skills, knowledge base, and level of reflection).
- **Desired outcomes** are in line with state/ministry/national frameworks as well as local outcomes the school or district sets as their north star. Desired outcomes also reflect what learners aspire to for themselves to motivate current and future learning.

Because of the various and potentially competing definitions out there for personalized learning as well as ambiguity of what it looks like, the table below provides a quick glimpse at what personalized learning is and isn’t. As you are reading, **reflect** on the potential misunderstandings that have impacted you, your students and their families, and your colleagues.

Space for Reflection:

COMPONENTS	WHAT IT ISN'T	WHAT IT IS
ROLE OF TEACHERS	<i>Managing student learning Functioning as tutors rather than instructors</i>	<i>Coaching student learning</i>
INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN	<i>Students doing anything they want to under the header of a topic, course, or theme</i>	<i>Parameters or guardrails to ensure alignment with standards, course/unit expectations</i>
USE OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT	<i>Collection of exit tickets that teachers score</i>	<i>Growing student metacognition about their own learning; providing clarity to teachers on next instructional steps</i>
USE OF TECHNOLOGY	<i>Teachers being replaced by screens</i>	<i>Thoughtful and intentional incorporation of technology as a platform for teaching and learning</i>
PHYSICAL SPACES	<i>Kids on yoga balls</i>	<i>Flexible spaces - choice and location</i>
BUDGET	<i>Oodles of cash</i>	<i>Can be done with 0 dollars or a small budget. It is more about what you spend it on.</i>
ROLE OF LEADERSHIP	<i>Micro-managing or providing limited staff support to grow professional practice</i>	<i>Being a lead learner, change agent and cheerleader of the work teachers are doing.</i>
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	<i>One and done, compliant</i>	<i>Using data to reach different educators need and allowing choice. (modeling what the classroom for students should look like)</i>

15 Nightmares to Avoid When Growing Personalized Learning in Your School or Division

The following collection comes from well-intentioned but tactical errors of how to introduce and grow personalized learning. We offer these “nightmares” to provide clarity on obstacles you may run into as you engaged with your faculty, families, and community members. Any of these obstacles can be acknowledged as important learning experiences from which new approaches can be designed.

1. **One-size-fits-all professional development to grow personalized learning:** One size fits all professional development to grow personalized learning does not work. As leaders, we lead by example and if we know one size doesn't fit all for students then we shouldn't have that mindset for educators.
2. **Not clarifying the “why” early and often enough to every stakeholder:** Don't assume everyone understands or has the same ideas you do about why education should change -- 90% of them don't understand and need to be taught. If stakeholders don't understand where and why they are trying personalized learning, they are unlikely to deal with the messiness of the initial steps.
3. **Starting with the wrong school and teams to be the pioneers:** Personalized Learning is a lot of hard work on the front end and then smooth sailing once you figure out what works. If you start off with the wrong teachers or school, however, this could cause a stall in your starting process. You need to start with the teachers and schools that have a growth mindset.
4. **Not showing examples of what it could look like so everyone has to figure it out:** Yes, there is no perfect one way of 'doing' personalized learning but sometimes allowing others to see it will be a springboard for what can work for their class. It gives them a reference point. Just make sure to explain that there is no one way and encourage seeing more than one school and/or district. Also know that examples don't always have to be a visit or a tour. There are books that can help you understand what it could look like along with districts having video, resources and podcasts.
5. **Not having a strong communication plan so everyone is on the same page:** Think of your communication plan like a roadmap, you know where and how you are going to get there but your stakeholders don't. Plan your journey accordingly and making sure that you have a place for stakeholders to revisit the roadmap in case they get lost.
6. **Speaking in language only educators can understand:** Make sure the language you are using is conversational and approachable. Many people are willing to nod their heads

because they don't want to look foolish. Provide processing time or quick checks of understanding with your Board members, parents, and community members, especially when you are in the early stages of growing personalized learning.

7. **Not providing a definition for personalized learning:** A well-articulated definition will help people get on the same page and articulate a consistent message. It is also important that you provide context as to where the definition came from. For example, if stakeholders see that there was opportunity to have a voice in the shaping of the definition, it indicates that personalized learning is a reflective of their community.
8. **Thinking that you have to start with a device or that you have to be 1:1:** Personalized Learning can be done without any technology, because it is about making it personal to the students based on needs and interest allowing them voice and choice. You don't need technology to do that, but it can help you do it! How can a teacher not love real-time data to be able to pull groups compared to grading a lot of papers to figure it out!
9. **Labeling personalized learning as a new initiative or pilot:** This is dangerous. If you label something as an "initiative" or "pilot" many educators think "this too shall pass" or that it is "going away." Philosophies of education never go away so don't make the mistake of labeling it like one. Instead start with a cohort or trailblazers that want to take the challenge on..
10. **Having personalized learning be something only the teachers are doing:** Personalized Learning is a philosophy or a way of approaching system, school, and classroom decisions. It is important for principals and district leaders to also be modeling the personalized learning philosophy in their professional development practices.
11. **Expecting personalized learning to happen even when structures, policies, and practices discourage risk-taking.** More often than not, staff and students are intrigued about personalized learning and are intrigued enough to step out and begin to imagine possibilities. Then they run into traditional practices (especially in evaluation) that put them right back into a mindset that it's not possible. For example, if you are encouraging teachers to try something new that might result in high-risk, low-reward for a little while, are they also evaluated using the same teacher evaluation system? If you are encouraging students to think and develop something outside of the box, do you provide time to rework and revise their approach? You may find yourself in a classic "chicken-or-the-egg dilemma" — you can only do personalized learning if traditional structures, policies, and practices shift. That is why we suggest a slow growth model of encouraging innovative approaches as well as making it safe for students and staff to design, test, get feedback, and iterate until it is ready for broader conversations.
12. **Failing to ask questions and thinking outside the box:** Strong educators ask questions not only to clarify understanding, but also to help them think outside the box. Our favorite

question to ask is, “What would you do in your classroom or school if you knew you could not fail?” It’s amazing to hear the answers and be able to empower them to take that risk! Another favorite is to ask “what-if questions.” Asking “what-if questions” provides educators an opportunity to look at ‘problems’ in a different way. For example, “What if you gave no homework?” or “What if you allowed students to choose where they want to sit?”

13. **Ignoring the culture of the school and/or division:** It is important to make sure you have a school/district culture that has a shared focus on learning for ALL students along with one that allows for risk taking. If you don’t have a environment where failing is a learning opportunity no one will take risks to growth their practice.

14. **Deciding that there are specific checkpoints or benchmarks that every staff member/school must meet:** It is important to start off by giving teachers autonomy, but still have some guardrails. For example, you can tell your staff, “We are starting personalized learning philosophy, but you can choose which subject area you want to start with.” Or have teachers take one area that they control and have them see how students can take more control. For example, if teachers hold weekly conferences with students, have them try to turn them into student-led conferences.

15. **Not reflecting on the process and learning from feedback:** A great personalized learning journey follows a design-thinking process. Learning is not linear, neither is your personalized journey. You always have to continue to reflect, gather feedback and learn from your mistakes.

The leaders who choose to champion personalized learning are the ones who are propelling education forward. We know today’s students will have to create their jobs, not look for jobs. They will compete with others around the globe. Don’t let these nightmares stop you from implementing personalized learning, as it is what is best for students but allow them to deepen your capacity to genuinely grow personalized learning in your school, classroom or district.

Reflective Question: What changes may be needed in your school or division based on the ‘nightmares’ you learned about or have experienced first-hand?

Frequently Asked Questions

Addressing “yes, buts” and worries openly and collectively is as important to growing personalized learning practice. The leadership around personalized learning starts by listening with understanding and empathy, questioning and problem posing, and thinking flexibly. This is why personalized learning and habits of mind go hand in hand; we are growing a culture of innovation and self-discovery that is as good for educators as it is for students.

Sample Questions from a range of school and division conversations:

- *How do I still teach the curriculum (and standards) so that students are prepared?*
- *How can I design experiences that students would more likely invest in?*
- *How can I empower my students in the classroom?*
- *How can I do less talking so my students can do more?*
- *What is the best way to grow personalized learning as a grass-roots rather than a top-down approach and make it sustainable?*
- *How can I encourage my colleagues to take responsible risks to grow their professional practice? What level of support do they need from their leaders and one another?*
- *How do we communicate this to our parents and community members? Where can we meaningfully bring them to the design table with us to develop and critique?*

**What questions on your mind that you are interested in exploring further in the precon?
Record below.**