



CONNECT: Making Learning Personal

Reports from the Field by the League of Innovators

Personalizing Instruction: Student Voice and Choice

Melinda S. Sota and Karen Mahon

The **Center on Innovations in Learning** developed its “Conversations with Innovators” event as a forum for its **League of Innovators** to engage in intimate discussions with author/experts on selected topics. The 2016 event was held at Temple University on June 22nd and 23rd. In each of three sessions, pairs of experts—each of whom had written a chapter for the Center’s recent publication, *Handbook on Personalized Learning for States, Districts, and Schools*—made brief 5–7 minute presentations on the designated topic, after which the floor was then opened for participants’ questions and discussion. The lively oral discussion was enhanced by participants’ postings on Padlet, an online virtual bulletin board. In three issues of *Connect*, the conversation from each session continues, with author/experts responding to the overflow of questions and comments. In Session 1, Joe Layng and Sam Redding discussed **Personal Competencies as Propellants of All Learning**; and in Session 3, Ryan Baker and Janet S. Twyman addressed the topic of **Information Technologies to Advance Teaching and Learning**.

In this issue of *Connect*, Melinda S. Sota and Karen Mahon respond to questions raised in Session 2, devoted to the topic of **Personalizing Instruction: Student Voice and Choice**. Dr. Sota, who wrote the *Handbook* chapters “**Co-designing Instruction With Students**” and “**Flipped Learning as a Path to Personalization**,” is an instructional designer with special interests in designing K–12 educational technology products and the role of formative evaluation in the design process. From 2007 to 2012, she served as a lead instructional designer at Headsprout and Mimio, where she codesigned several iPad, online, and interactive whiteboard programs for teaching music, science, and reading, including Headsprout Reading Comprehension, which was awarded the Software and Information Industry Association’s CODiE award for best online instructional solution. She has written articles and book chapters on reading comprehension, differentiated instruction, response to intervention, and research-based practices.

Dr. Mahon, who wrote the chapter “**Personalizing Curriculum: Curation and Creation**” for the *Handbook*, is the president and founder of Balefire Labs, an online educational app review service that focuses on evaluating the instructional quality and usability of mobile apps for Grades preK–12. Her practice guide for educators, *Creating a Content Strategy for Mobile Devices in the Classroom*, is available for free download on the **CIL website**. She is an educational psychologist and instructional designer with more than 15 years’ experience in education

This field report is the eighth in a series produced by the Center on Innovations in Learning’s League of Innovators. The series describes, discusses, and analyzes policies and practices that enable personalization in education. Issues of the series will present either issue briefs or, like this one, field reports on lessons learned by practitioners recounting the successes and obstacles to success encountered in implementing personalized learning.

Neither the issue briefs nor the field reports attempt to present in-depth reviews of the research; for those resources readers are encouraged to access the Center on Innovations in Learning’s resource database. Topics should be of particular interest to state education agencies and district and school personnel.



technology. Prior to founding Balefire Labs, she was global senior manager of learning sciences at Mimio Interactive Teaching Technologies, where she established Mimio's global content strategy and instructional philosophy.

Below are the questions asked by attendees, followed by the authors' responses.

1. What is the role of SEAs in assisting teachers, schools, and/or districts with implementation of personalized learning? Conversely, how can teachers, schools, and/or districts help SEAs support student voice and choice?

K.M.: The most important thing that SEAs can do for the teachers, schools, and districts that they serve is to provide them with a clear definition of the instructional methods that support personalized learning effectively and then train them in how to use those methods. There still is not a consistent definition of personalized learning in the market so, in order for teachers, schools, and districts to use them effectively, they must first have a shared definition of what it is and how to do it so that they can communicate effectively with each other.

When it comes to voice and choice, the first, and most important discussion to be had is around establishing the goals for incorporating student input and how those goals will be evaluated. We know from the educational research that voice and choice has some impact on student motivation, but no demonstrable impact on academic performance. So SEAs should help teachers, schools, and districts understand that including voice and choice is done as part of establishing a school culture, not as part of academic performance interventions. It's important for educators not to expect voice and choice to produce meaningful academic performance change, lest they be disappointed or believe the lack of change is due to some fault of their own in implementing a voice and choice program.

It's also important, when allowing student voice and choice, that some rules are not violated, lest student academic performance be adversely affected: First, students shouldn't be allowed to opt out of important academic activities because those activities are non-preferred. And second, students need to develop a range of skills and can't be allowed to rely too heavily on things they do well (e.g., interpreting information in visual formats) at the expense of building important skills in less fluent areas (e.g., interpreting information presented aurally).

2. We think of technology as automatically providing personalized learning and good instruction, but educational technology products are often *not* designed according to sound instructional design principles and may not have outcome data to show whether or not they are effective. What can we do about this?



Dr. Sota discusses the need for producers of educational technology products to engage in an iterative design process and collect outcome data.

M.S.: As Ryan Baker and others noted in the Conversations with Innovators discussion, in order for companies to spend the additional time and money engaged in the sort of iterative design process that can help ensure products' effectiveness and to collect the outcome data and do the research necessary to show evidence of effectiveness, it has to influence purchasing decisions. Schools, districts, and states can encourage this by (1) understanding and clearly defining the type of information they want from companies, and (2) ensuring that this information



enters into purchasing decisions.

K.M.: I agree with what Melinda said. I would add that not all companies are going to have strong empirical data demonstrating the effectiveness of their products, but, at a minimum, their products should include student performance reports with actionable data. Teachers are generally more concerned with individual student progress that can be represented well in clear and comprehensive visual reports. If a product doesn't have empirical effectiveness data or performance reports with actionable data, however, then schools need to be willing to walk away from a product, even if it's something they've used for a long time.

3. Revamping the current educational system is a huge task and we have a tendency to “do it the way we’ve always done it.” What are your recommendation(s) to begin the change process?

M.S.: Start small. Teachers can start by experimenting with personalized learning in their classrooms with a single lesson or unit and add more elements of a personalized system gradually. Schools and districts can support efforts by working on larger-scale elements, such as schoolwide goal hierarchies. As mentioned during the conversations event, SEAs can help assist efforts by helping to remove barriers to personalized learning such as seat time requirements.

K.M.: Starting small is not important only to keep change-making manageable; it's also important because small, gradual change allows teachers and school staff to more easily evaluate the effectiveness of those changes. Changing too many things at once makes it virtually impossible to tell which changes have effected positive results and which have not. So the spirit of experimenting is exactly right. Try something, see how it goes. If it works well, keep doing it. If it doesn't, drop it and try something else. Personalized learning has many features...not all of them have to be implemented in every situation.



Dr. Mahon discusses how starting small is important because it allows teachers and school staff to evaluate the effectiveness of changes.

4. What role does the concept of “agency” play in personalized learning?

M.S.: As with any concept, describing what agency means in terms of what it looks like can be helpful, because it clarifies for everyone what is being discussed and fits the concept more concretely into its relation to both learning and other, related concepts—for example, autonomy and self-efficacy.

So—what does agency or a sense of agency mean?

At a basic level, agency might be defined as control over one's own actions (versus control by outside forces) and the belief that those actions will have a meaningful effect on the world—in other words, actively and intentionally bringing about some result. A learner chooses to do something and has a high degree of confidence that a particular outcome will be achieved.

Defining it this way also takes it out of the person and puts it squarely in the environment, which can be designed to help support learner agency. That is, rather than focusing on whether or not a learner “has” agency, we can more easily focus on designing the type of environment that will support active, intentional learner choice and confidence in those choices. For example, we could look at



what actions the learner is able to take (e.g., choice of goals, ways to reach a goal, deciding whether or not sufficient progress is being made toward a goal, determining when the goal has been achieved, etc.) and what the consequences or results are (e.g., Is a grade given by the teacher or are students monitoring and evaluating their own progress? Is the outcome a grade or something intrinsic to the task itself?).

Given this definition, the concept of agency fits well within the personalized learning approach. It also highlights the need for skill development with regard to the learning process itself (e.g., self-regulation and metacognitive skills—see chapters by Redding and Layng in the *Handbook of Personalized Learning*) because, in order to have or show agency, learners must be confident in their actions and expect that their actions will have an effect.



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