Personalized Learning: People, Practices, and Products

The transformation under way at the point where teaching, learning, and technology intersect is so promising and so complicated that it is no wonder those of us involved in talking and writing about these developments are looking for the perfect turn of phrase to bring it all together. It’s our nature to seek out words to attach to the issues that matter, an inclination clearly at work within the universe of activities collected under the term personalized learning. The desire to name important trends in the technology landscape is hardly new: EDUCAUSE has made important contributions to the effort, capturing the imagination of the higher ed IT community by furthering both the idea of technology as a “game-changer” and the concept of “connected learning.”

Yet when it comes to personalized learning as a transformational trend in higher education, we’re not all sitting around and waiting for the right phrase to come along before springing into action. Spring has sprung—with activity, research, debate, and hype all fully in progress. Curiously, we appear to be searching for a flag to rally around even as we acknowledge that expectations for personalized learning are exceedingly high—and it either is exerting a major influence over or is already incorporated into IT strategy at 21 percent of colleges and universities surveyed. For those of you who, like me, attended college at some point between the time of mood rings and the Internet, we certainly had plenty of opportunity to experience what personalization was not: being herded at registration from table to table to gather papers, sign documents, collect carbon copies, and generally do what we were told to do—before being shunted off to another table, office, or building. Notwithstanding this initial experience, our favorite staff and professors were the ones who personalized our experience. They recognized us by name and changed their teaching approach as they better understood our individual learning needs. I would meet Dr. Lucy Fryxell in her office to talk over some fine point of her inscrutable Advanced Grammars textbook, and a few days later in class she would work into her lecture some of the very same problems we had discussed in person. Voila! “Personalized learning.”

The term personalized learning is both ambiguous and new, but the practice is not. What is new is the way that emerging technologies can amplify the experience, especially with the help of good course design and excellent execution. The articles featured in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review may debate various elements of how personalized learning can be deployed, but the many powerful examples of personalized learning in action speak for themselves.

In “How Personalized Learning Unlocks Student Success,” Nazeema Ali, Rahim Rajan, and Greg Ratliff from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation note that student-centric approaches address the need for social justice and equity for underrepresented students. Pointing out that family income is currently one of the strongest predictors of whether a student will be successful, they advocate for personalized approaches, convinced that more individualized support will help to balance the scales. They report that some practices under the personalized learning umbrella—notably digital courseware and adaptive learning—can accelerate content mastery by 50 percent and can increase pass rates by one-third for at-risk students taking high-quality blended courses. Integrated Planning and Advising for Student Success (iPASS) systems, such as those supported by grants distributed by EDUCAUSE (http://www.educause.edu/library/integrated-planning-and-advising-for-student-success-ipass), also show particular promise. Arizona State University, for example, saw an 11.6 percentage point increase in its six-year graduation rate, and early results from the first round of iPASS (continued on page 6)
programs indicate a boost in retention rates of up to 10 percent. Similarly, Austin Community College found strong gains resulting from its movement from an analog to digital advising system.

In “Personalized Learning: What It Really Is and Why It Really Matters,” Michael Feldstein and Phil Hill write that we should “think of personalized learning as a practice rather than a product.” Essex County College, they point out, successfully redesigned a developmental math course with personalized learning approaches, yet the resulting benefits were not limited to the technology-enabled interactions: the redesign freed up time for faculty to meet individually with students to discuss their goals and progress. Redesigning courses should be the focus of the conversation around personalized learning, with technology as an important part, but only a part, of this larger picture. Likewise, the success of the large lecture course redesign at the University of California, Davis, extended beyond the technology itself and created new opportunities to connect with students: “Once again, in contrast to marketing pitches and popular narratives, the software played only a supporting role, albeit an important one.” When we are disabused of the notion that simply procuring personalized learning technology is enough, the crucial work of course redesign can begin, for which Feldstein and Hill offer advice, nearly all of it related to people and practices—not products.

Moving on from practice, Phil Ventimiglia and George Pullman stress, in “From Written to Digital: The New Literacy,” the importance of focusing not only on how we teach but also on what we teach. They suggest that whether a course deploys personalized, adaptive, differentiated, competency-based, or some other learning approach, course design and course content are crucial. Redesigning courses for digital literacy encourages intellectual independence: “The goal is to teach students how to think in digital ways in order to make informed technological decisions and even, in some cases, to develop their own technology.” One way to do so, they note, is by encouraging students to write code. As Ventimiglia and Pullman explain: “One of the chief intellectual transformations that shifting from traditional written literacy to digital literacy requires is recognizing the difference between dynamic and static content.”

EDUCAUSE research has shown that institution-wide collaboration beyond the technology itself is crucial. After all, launching an early-alert system is a waste of dollars and bytes if faculty don’t use the tool in their courses, and the same dynamic holds true again and again. The EDUCAUSE Benchmarking Service, with its new maturity and technology deployment indices, makes this point in compelling ways (http://www.educause.edu/benchmarking). The student success technologies maturity index (see figure 1) provides an example. Staff wondering how far along a college or university is in its efforts to

![FIGURE 1. Student Success Technologies Maturity Index](image-url)
improve student success technologies will immediately see that technology (information systems) is only a part of the broader puzzle that includes policy, leadership, student support, analytics, and collaboration. Managing change is not about technology alone; it is about the productive interaction of people, processes, and technology.

One would hope that none of this is a surprise in 2016. In the 1990s, I witnessed the great scramble to “throw up more courses on the web”—as I heard more than once (without irony). We imagined that the new technologies would solve so many problems, from overfilled parking lots to underfunded budgets. Since that time, I hope we have come to better understand that the most transformative technologies enable solutions that can’t be realized without people taking the lead. In the case of personalized learning, we should let the genuine excitement and also the hype launch us forward, but without leaving people behind. With thousands of students falling short of realizing their academic hopes and dreams every semester, the stakes are too high to get this one wrong.

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