On the Path to Personalized Teaching
Imagine that you are a student at Tidewater High School, a fictitious comprehensive American high school that is organized into small learning communities. Units of study in each learning community are planned around the “big ideas” in each subject area and often have interdisciplinary ramifications. The idea in your current unit has been carefully articulated: “The concept of natural selection is important in science, mathematics, history, and literature. It has changed the way we see and understand the world. We must therefore be able to think about it flexibly and talk about it accurately.” Your learning community, the Marine Science Academy, often focuses on issues confronted by the local fishing industry. The city council is currently considering whether to lease city-owned offshore waters to salmon farmers, which would improve the local economy, but would cause problems if the farm-bred salmon escape and crossbreed with the wild salmon that inhabit the waters nearby. Students and teachers in your academy decide to study the salmon dilemma in your current unit of study.

In biology class you and your classmates ask, If farm-bred salmon escape and crossbreed with the wild salmon, what traits might their offspring inherit? The question fits into the study of evolution in the state-mandated science curriculum. Teachers and students agree to divide the class into several groups. Each group will research one aspect of the project and share its information with the rest of the class. One group plans to create children’s books that provide an overview of the topic, including the geology of the fossil record, a brief history of the concept, and basic scientific principles. You were tempted to join the children’s book group, but because you have had some difficulty understanding the principles of genetic assortment that are presented in the textbook, your teacher has challenged you to teach the rest of the class how to interpret Punnett squares.
In mathematics class you and your classmates are answering the question, At what ratios might inherited traits from farm-bred salmon persist? As part of the integrated curriculum plan, the teacher is using the chapter on ratio in the textbook to assign investigations into that topic. Although you still have some difficulty understanding the textbook, your teacher is able to help you in a guided reading group and your classmates give you support in your advisory group. After the “pure math” investigations, your math teacher will guide you to an understanding of how the mathematical laws of assortment work in your study of genetics. In the end, you will be able to make predictions about trait distribution when varieties of salmon are crossbred.

In social studies class, you are researching the history of the idea of natural selection and its effect on society. You are a member of a group that is creating a timeline to show the progression of thought that made the concept of natural selection possible. Other groups are researching major figures and events. Your group will develop a brochure for community members to give citizens the background they need for their approaching decision about salmon farming.

The drama group is preparing a production of Inherit the Wind, a play about illegally teaching the theory of evolution during the 1920s. Although you are not acting in their production, you are reading the play in English class and writing monologues from different characters’ points of view, which will be performed as sidebars to the production. After the performances, you will study the craft of the persuasive essay to prepare the arguments that you will offer to the city council. Even now you are creating a bank of vocabulary words, concepts, and phrases to support your argument.

When it is time to take the standardized tests at the end of the year, your teachers use your project portfolio to help you identify the standards you have already met and rehearse the test with you but don’t otherwise find it necessary to do extensive test prep. You know the importance of taking the tests seriously because you are fully aware of the role they play in your overarching personal learning plan. Even so, your teachers call you the night before to ensure that you’re getting a good night’s rest and greet you when you come to school the next morning to encourage you.

**Purpose**

What you are experiencing as a student at Tidewater is a thoroughly realized version of personalized teaching, which Keefe and Jenkins (2000) define as “the effort on the part of a school to take into account individual student characteristics and needs, and flexible instructional practices in organizing the student learning environment” (p. xv). It embodies the recommendations for teaching that were articulated in Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution (NASSP, 1996).

The effects of personalized teaching on student performance have been well documented. What may be less understood and perhaps as important for the long-term viability of school reform is the effect of personalization on teachers. When teachers talk to one another about ideas and teaching strategies as well as their students’ needs, they internalize the collegial academic model that will most excite their students to explore those same ideas and use the strategies. Wasley and Lear (2000) write that “collegial interaction while learning new things can extend the depth of everyone’s understanding” (p. 65). Therefore, personalized teaching is not an isolated, or isolating, phenomenon. Instead, it combats the deadening effects on learning that result from teachers’ isolation and anonymity in large-school settings. Almost all teachers find it emotionally fulfilling and personally energizing when students begin to succeed, especially where they have previously failed.

**Organization**

The National Center for Research on Teacher Learning (1995) has determined that personalized teaching is viable when:

- Teachers develop “a philosophy that views teaching as helping students comprehend the implications of new ideas and information for their existing understandings” (p. 2)
- Teachers understand that students are diverse “cognitively, socially, culturally, ethnically, linguistically” (p. 2)
- Teachers understand that they need to “learn what they need to know to support new learning for all students” (p. 1)
- Stakeholders understand that “teachers need opportunities…to try out new approaches and to assess the effects of these approaches” (p. 1)
- Stakeholders understand that “professional development must be stitched into the work routine of teachers, not tacked onto the work day or week” (p. 1)
Stakeholders understand that “understanding complex tasks and ideas requires substantial time: time to understand new goals, to test out new ideas, to assess their effects, to adjust the approach, and time to assess again” (p. 2).

Stakeholders understand that “without deep and flexible understanding of content, teachers are handicapped in the critical task of helping diverse students find points of access to the school curriculum” (p. 2).

To create these characteristics, schools must provide appropriate professional development opportunities, both from within and beyond the school setting, and establish structures that support vibrant professional learning communities that have a clear vision. The vision must pervade the organization, top to bottom. Each level of the school that makes personalized teaching viable supports the levels below and above. Teachers find themselves working in teams: design teams, best practices teams, and small learning community teams as well as the traditional departmental groups.

Meeting with colleagues to discuss curriculum integration and strategies that emphasize depth over breadth of coverage can be a new and intimidating idea to many practitioners. Once they are given the tools for collaboration across the disciplines, however, their creativity will serve the students’ learning needs. The result will be a productive and rewarding professional climate that allows scenarios like the one at Tidewater to become a reality.

Content
Teachers who plan the content of personalized teaching must clearly understand their school’s mission. They must articulate their own beliefs and know how their beliefs correspond to the mission. They will want to share their beliefs with their teaching teams to develop mutual understanding. Although statements of belief will almost certainly differ, this does not need to be a cause for conflict; instead, it can be a source of strength. For example, one teacher may focus on educating students to become participating members of a democracy. Another teacher may focus on the need for academic rigor. Rather than being mutually exclusive, teachers’ beliefs can complement one another and take different, but equally important, roles in the planning of a project.

Another key piece in preparing personalized curriculum units and projects includes mandates, such as performance standards, standardized texts, and academy themes. If mandates are seen as “something we have to teach,” they become a discouraging burden on teachers. If they are seen as ways to inspire, inform, and lend coherence to planning, they can be seen as useful. Both vertical departmental discussions and horizontal grade-team discussions are useful in mapping and creatively incorporating mandates into curriculum designs.

Teachers must identify the big ideas in their content area, establish essential questions to guide the students toward these ideas, determine what students will need to know and be able to do to thoroughly understand the ideas, then create appropriate tools to assess whether the students are learning what they need to know. Classroom assessments for personalized teaching are always varied, ongoing, and carefully designed to give the teacher useful information from multiple perspectives. Collectively, the measures provide feedback on where students still have misconceptions, where they are learning and applying skills, and where they are recalling and using information effectively.

Administrator’s Checklist
Principals might find the following checklist useful to assess themselves in supporting teachers who are changing their practice:

☐ Do I understand the demands that reform places on teachers and what it takes to change teachers’ roles and practice? Am I providing support and advice?

☐ Am I providing opportunities for my teachers to learn from one another’s successes and failures and to share ideas and knowledge, both in and out of school?

☐ Am I providing access to coaches and critical friends who can observe teachers as they try out new practices and provide nonevaluative comments and suggestions?

☐ Am I providing access to a larger learning community that is a source of support and ideas—a community that consists of administrators, students, parents, school councils, school boards, and businesspeople?

☐ Am I providing chances for teachers to experience learning in ways that are consistent with the reform and to observe teaching practices that help all students achieve the learner outcomes?

☐ Have I provided time and space for teachers to become involved in the sometimes-protracted process of changing roles and practice?

☐ Have I arranged access to professional development that is a central part of teaching?

☐ Have I proactively worked with policymakers and the public to create a climate for professional development that is sustained and long-term?
Workshop Structure

Teachers of personalized classrooms tend to use the workshop structure in their lesson designs. The workshop structure has three parts: greater teacher responsibility at the beginning of a lesson, shared responsibility during work time, and greater student responsibility at the end of the lesson. Here is a diagram of activities and time frames in a personalized classroom using the workshop structure:

**Mini-Lesson** (typically 10–20 minutes)
May include:
- Implicit modeling: The teacher performs an authentic task, such as using a strategy for reading or solving a math problem, while the students observe.
- Explicit modeling: The teacher makes the process of performing the task explicit, often in the form of a "think-aloud" (i.e., speaking his or her thoughts aloud as the task is performed).
- Shared modeling: The teacher has a conversation with the whole class about how he or she is performing the task, answering questions, soliciting the students’ observations, and so forth.

**Independent Work Time** (typically 25–45 minutes)
Always includes:
- Sustained work: Students practice the strategy the teacher demonstrated.
-May include:
  - Solitary, paired, group, or guided work
  - Conferences with the teacher
  - Experimentation with other strategies
  - Response groups
  - Project work
  - Portfolio work
  - Rehearsal

**Share Session** (typically 5–15 minutes)
Always includes:
- Sharing of and reflection on the work students completed during independent work time.
May include:
- Sharing of content
- Sharing of process
- Focus on one student’s work
- Focus on several students’ work
- Focus on one group’s work
- Focus on several groups’ work
- Teacher observations
- Student performance
- Showcase of work
- Celebration of work

This diagram is not comprehensive, and should not be seen as a rigid formula. Rather it might be used as a lens to help clarify what administrators observe and a glossary to enable constructive conversation. Nothing will kill efforts at personalization faster than the inflexible use of fixed ideas and structures for purely evaluative purposes.
After this preparatory process, teachers are in a good position to choose teaching methods and instructional strategies and generate lesson plans. By definition, personalized teaching creates a student-centered learning environment in which teachers become facilitators, mentors, and coaches, and students become active learners, engaged in cooperative learning, peer tutoring, role-playing, labs, and debates. Movement, imagery, hands-on activity and social interaction become basic instructional strategies.

Once teachers have planned their methods and strategies, they can fit their work into a timeline. Because the design is flexible and students are responsible for taking charge of their own learning, coverage of the content is ensured and depth of understanding is achieved. In the process, students and teachers will use a variety of resources, such as visiting experts, museums, Web sites, and the like. The textbook in an interactive classroom is usually only one of many such resources.

Beliefs, mandates, standards, understandings, essential questions, skills, knowledge, varied assessments, constructivist instructional methods and interactive strategies, timelines, resources: These are some of the basic elements of personalized teaching. Each is critical. All are intertwined. Personalized teaching becomes something of an art, and it is by no means a new one. Tolstoy (2000) describes how it operated in the school he founded in 1859 at Yasnaya Polyana:

The best teacher is the one who can instantly recognize what is bothering a particular student. This ability in turn gives the teacher a knowledge of the greatest possible number of methods; the ability to invent new methods; and above all—rather than blind adherence to one method—the conviction that all methods are one-sided, that the best possible method is the one that answers best all the possible difficulties incurred by the student. This is not a method, but an art and a talent. (pp. 186–187)

**Assessment**

Ongoing assessment of performance at every level of the system is needed to successfully personalize teaching. Is the district making personalization a priority? Is the school collecting data to see how students in personalized environments are doing, not only on tests but also in attendance, tardiness, and classroom disruptions? How are the teams faring? Are projects going well? If teams aren’t working on full-fledged projects, are they integrating curriculum in other meaningful ways? Are the attempts to personalize learning for students producing deeper understanding, more thorough knowledge, and higher skill levels?

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**The North Reading Story**

**By Ann Papagiotas**

At North Reading (MA) High School, we began our journey into personalized teaching during the 1998–1999 school year. During this first year, we evaluated our school mission and its relationship to our vision for student learning. With the support of the school committee and the superintendent, we created two academic division leader (ADL) positions. One ADL is responsible for supervising the curriculum, instruction, and assessment of the humanities teachers (English and social studies), and the other ADL is responsible for supervising the curriculum, instruction, and assessment of the math, science, and technology teachers.

Each ADL meets with teachers individually to discuss lesson planning, instructional practices, learning styles and multiple intelligences, assessment practices, and classroom organization, and they hold academic division meetings to share information gleaned from individual teacher meetings with the larger groups. For example, during one divisional meeting, teachers shared their most successful practices with one another, and the math teachers were able to share successful strategies with the science and technology teachers. At another divisional meeting, teachers in the humanities shared successful assessment techniques. The ADLs also model instruction so teachers within the divisions can observe personalized teaching in a student-centered learning environment.

The other academic areas—including foreign language, the visual and performing arts, and physical education—are supervised by curriculum chairs. Each month, the ADLs and curriculum chairs meet with the principal and the guidance counselors to plan educational strategies that will personalize teaching and learning. The curriculum chairs and the ADLs oversee the entire curriculum, instruction, and assessment component at North Reading. Their decisions are communicated to the teachers at the monthly divisional or departmental meetings.

The school leadership team was also reconfigured to include special education staff members, guidance counselors, the school psychologist, the school nurse, and the athletic director. This structure was developed to ensure that all aspects of a student’s school life were touched, which enables the teaching staff to gain information on the whole student and personalize teaching and learning to a much greater degree.
Just as teachers must use data from a variety of classroom assessments, educators at every level of the school and district must know how to use data from a variety of sources, including disaggregated test data; student work; student, teacher, and parent surveys; unit and lesson plans; interviews; administrative observations; and reports from outside observers. In a traditional command-and-control environment, this data is often seen as provocative and threatening. In the collegial culture of a more democratic environment, the data will be informative, affirming, and challenging. It will make further strides in personalized teaching possible.

**Leadership**

Personalized teaching is best developed in mission-driven schools that practice collaborative leadership within design teams, best practices teams, small learning communities, and the like. Paradoxically, principals as instructional leaders are key to guiding a school to this form of leadership. In addition to ensuring that teachers are given the professional development and structural supports they need, principals must also engage the district, community boards, parent bodies, and other leaders in a partnership to guarantee that the support is sustained and informed. District administrators must establish a clear vision, model the collegial behavior they expect from other layers of the system, help principals hone their skills, and provide principals with the autonomy and resources to make appropriate decisions for their unique settings.

Everyone in the school community must be aware that change is challenging. But they must be equally aware that the benefits of personalized teaching are worthwhile and attainable. And personalized teaching *is* attainable—if the external elements of personalized teaching are put in place and sustained. To do this, every individual in the system must rise to the challenge. PL

**References**