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Julie Coiro

University of Rhode Island, jcoiro@uri.edu

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Let's Get Personal: Balancing talk with technology to *truly* personalize learning **Julie Coiro, University of Rhode Island (In Literacy Today, Jan/Feb 2016)**

In October 2015, a large international study titled *Students, Computers, and Learning* (OECD, 2015) reported that access to computers had no significant impact on students' proficiency in reading, math, and science. In many countries, using computers frequently at school actually worsened performance. While these findings may relate to differences in professional development or implementation, it was clear that drill and practice software had a negative effect on student performance. The report's authors appropriately acknowledged that "building deep conceptual understanding and higher-order thinking requires intensive student-teacher interactions, and technology sometimes distracts from this valuable human engagement."

Nevertheless, school districts are rapidly adopting 1:1 laptop initiatives coupled with blended learning models aimed at increasing the amount of time students spend working independently at a computer at home and school. Proponents of blended learning argue that the model helps teachers customize digital lessons designed to meet individual needs and allow learners to work at their own pace. Yet, as I listen to teachers and principals, I worry that personalization has come to mean something very different from the personally relevant student-directed experiences that today's learners crave most.

Personalized vs. Personal Approaches to Teaching and Learning

So, what is the difference between personalized and personal approaches to teaching and learning? In the ed-tech community, personalization is described as a top-down designed or tailored approach to learning whereby experiences can be customized for the student, but they are still controlled by the teacher. Digital playlists, for example, are designed to serve up learning based on a formula of what teachers (or computers) think a particular learner needs most. Students have the ability to move through sequenced activities at their own pace, but often, they have little choice in selecting the activities they engage with and even less control over how they demonstrate understanding. Moreover, students typically move through personalized playlists independently with few opportunities to construct ideas and collaborate with others. Finally, personalized instruction seems to require the learner to interact with a computer.

Personal learning experiences, on the other hand, involve something human whereby the learner initiates and controls the learning process. Often, this type of learning emerges from actively engaging and talking with others about one's personal wonderings. Often, these wonderings are sparked by a topic or problem encountered in school, at home, or in the community. These personal learning experiences offer students opportunities to generate questions and create products that connect their own interests to real-life concerns in personally fulfilling ways.

Importantly, technology is not critical for learning to be personal. Rather, all that is needed is space and time to actively reflect, collaborate, and engage with personally meaningful ideas. However, once students are empowered to direct their own learning pathways, technology can open the door to an infinite range of texts, tools, and people they can use to explore and connect ideas in personally meaningful ways.

Why the Big Fuss?

My concern is not that technology is playing an increasingly important role in teaching and learning or that schools are exploring the potential of blended learning approaches to differentiate instruction. When blended learning is implemented successfully, teachers and students use a range of human and digital resources to improve their ability to think, problem solve, collaborate, and communicate. A delicate balance of talk and technology use keeps all of us grounded in conversations with other people about what really matters.

What worries me is that, in some circles, personalized learning has increasingly come to represent a narrow strategy of computer-based instruction with limited opportunities for human interaction and personal ownership of the learning process. When blended learning becomes synonymous with separating students into cubbies equipped with headphones and customized digital playlists for a large percentage of each school day, we risk losing sight of the human elements that make learning a truly personal endeavor.

Where Do We Go From Here?

As we continue to explore approaches to blending learning, I believe at least four sets of instructional practices can serve to connect today's digital learners to their world in ways that matter.

- **Build a culture of personal inquiry.** Provide regular opportunities for students to pursue topics that are meaningful to their interests. Then, introduce students to a range of texts, tools, and people offline and online that they can connect with and use as springboards to become more emotionally engaged with their own learning.
- **Expect learners to talk.** Design personal digital inquiry experiences to foster collaborative discussions that lead to multiple pathways for knowledge building, knowledge expression, and personal action. Engage students with literacy experiences that facilitate face-to-face and online conversation-building, argumentation, negotiation, and presentation skills.
- **Encourage digital creation.** Remember that personal learning experiences are created by individuals, not delivered by computers. Asking students to create original products, including digital compositions, enables them to share new knowledge while connecting insights to different spheres of their lives (school, home, and community) in meaningful and relevant ways.
- **Make space for students to participate and matter.** Actively involve students in deep, authentic, and personally relevant learning experiences that foster academic achievement, reflection, and civic engagement. Through participation, individuals assert their autonomy and ownership of learning; in turn, their inquiry becomes more personal and engaging.

As you explore ways to personalize learning in your classroom, strive for that delicate balance of talk and technology use within student-directed learning spaces where all learners have a voice and the opportunity to learn about what they love most.