



Encouraging Student Agency in Personalized Learning

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“I had to switch from ‘Here’s your study guide and here’s your answer sheet’ to ‘How do you want to learn the content, and how can we support you?’”

—Ryan Marquis, senior at Pittsfield Middle High School, Pittsfield, NH quoted in “What Happens When Students Control Their Own Education?” (2014)

Personalized learning is not simply letting students learn at their own pace with the technology that they choose. More importantly, it is about enabling students to direct their learning: choosing the routes they will take and the collaboration they need to achieve mastery, and the methods by which they can prove their mastery.

Preparing Students to Run Their Own Lives

It is not unusual for students to be confused when first confronted with a truly personalized learning environment. Younger students especially are not used to having control over their education: they are used to receiving direction from an instructor, being evaluated by the instructor, and then being told by the instructor when it is time to move on to the next packet of material.

Thus, students need to learn not just the facts and figures necessary to meet mandated requirements, but also how to operate in a world where they have agency over what they do and when they do it. Teachers must foster

students’ sense of competency so they believe that they can handle such a task, nurture their autonomy so they become comfortable controlling their classroom behavior, and embrace collaborative learning so students accept the advantages of working as a group (James, 2015).

A critical factor in having students engage fully is high-quality teacher-student relationships. This helps students fill their developmental need for connection with others and a feeling of belonging in a group. Teacher-student relationships can be facilitated by:

- Caring about students’ social and emotional needs
- Displaying positive attitudes and enthusiasm
- Increasing one-on-one time with students
- Treating students fairly

These tactics help students recognize that their teacher trusts them and believes that they can accomplish their goals. Students are then empowered to plan their learning with the teacher, suggest adjustments, seek help with problems, and assert themselves when necessary to fulfill their educational needs.

Promoting a mastery orientation—pursuing an activity because students want to learn and understand, rather than just wanting a good grade or to please adults in their lives—is one more key to student engagement. To encourage

this mindset, teachers can frame success in terms of learning rather than performing. They can also place the emphasis on individual progress by recognizing student improvement and effort (Anderman & Patrick, 2012).

Facility with these strategies for approaching learning and collaboration will do as much for students as mastery of facts, theories, and details. It will increase student engagement, interest in their education, confidence, and self-reliance.

Student Leadership in the Classroom

What does it look like when students are fully engaged in their own education?

First, teachers learn more from their students. In order to allow students to use the learning tools that are best for them, student-teacher conferences (both group and one-on-one) will be a regular feature in the classroom. Students have access to all sorts of “learning tools” in their life outside the classroom that they probably are better equipped to use than the teacher is. For instance, many online games allow 3D modeling that can be adapted to fit a number of academic subjects: geometry, chemistry, architecture, and so on. There are multiple video-creation apps that students may already be using that they can put to use making video reports to replace standard book reports. In conference, the group can brainstorm novel ways to use this technology to assist students with special needs, or those who need action to learn, or those who might otherwise “check out” during a regular lecture or book discussion.

Because students are involved with planning their activities, they can also be empowered to choose the activity that will work best for them (both for learning and for assessment). For example, teachers can give students three choices of learning paths. The first two choices could be teacher-structured with the basic requirements and methods already listed, but with opportunities for students to have a voice in shaping some of the methods. The third choice might include the learning targets students must achieve, but would challenge students to design the task. The students would propose a plan, and the teacher determines if it is acceptable or if it needs to be tweaked.



To further student ownership of their work, they should be brought into designing the rubrics for formative assessment. When students create the rubrics, they develop understanding of what quality learning is. Very often, the students establish rigorous expectations that they would not accept if they merely received the rubrics from the teacher.

And to review student progress during the year, not only with the students themselves but also with their parents or guardians, students should have the chance to actually lead the conferences. This gives students opportunities to reflect on their learning. When they are in charge of the conversation with adults, students benefit from their preparations for the meeting. They review products that show their academic growth. They analyze how their work connects with their grades or standards-based competencies and evaluate next steps for progress.



Far from being a paean to a student's awesomeness, teachers find that, given the responsibility to lead the conference, students are evenhanded in what they present to their parents and how they present it. Brigid Jennings, an eighth-grade teacher at Wildwood IB World Magnet School in Chicago, talks about the materials her students bring to the conferences (Schools That Work, 2016):

It's all about their learning and what's important to them. When students are given ample time to reflect, you would be surprised that they won't just fill their binder with every A+ paper they have. They'll include places where they struggled, places where they improved, and places where they need help. This doesn't always happen easily, but this is where teacher/student reflection and conversation come in.

Conclusion

Achieving true personalization of education requires talented, dedicated teachers who take the time to listen to their students, determine their needs, and be creative in fulfilling those needs. The results are students who buy into their own education, take control of it, and come out as confident, lifelong learners.

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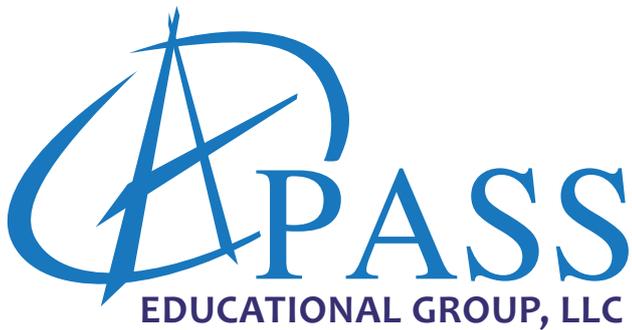
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