A Short Guide to Personalized Learning

Joseph S. Renzulli
University of Connecticut

True personalization requires more than just looking at achievement levels and trying to compensate for deficiencies. There are conferences for just about everything these days, but because of my interest in personalized learning, it appeared that this one on redesigning personalized learning would be just the ticket for gaining new insights into how learning can be more responsive to the divergent needs and diverse populations in today's schools.

Most educators agree that the one-size-fits-all curriculum needs addressing, and this by-invitation-only "summit" showed so much promise that I wangled an invite. Resplendent with all the buzzwords of the personalization and differentiation mystique ("flexible," "student-driven," "authentic," "everywhere learning," "systemic redesign"—to mention a few), the event would be staffed by the gurus of school reform and attended by education power brokers and CEOs from the public and private sectors. Wow! And the expectation that technology was a major answer to this promise of a revolution in personalizing learning made the conference even more appealing.

The emergence of technology in education has certainly created a renewed interest in personalizing learning and providing teachers with the tools necessary for differentiating curriculum. In addition to achievement levels, information about student interests, learning styles, and preferred modes of expression allow us to make decisions about personalization that take multiple dimensions of the learner into account.

This information can easily be gathered and analyzed using computer generated profiles and from search engines that match multiple categorized resources from databanks containing vast quantities of highly interactive online material. Teachers can use this technology to infuse into any and all standards-driven curriculum highly engaging enrichment materials that can make any lesson or unit of study more exciting, engaging, and enjoyable. Students can gain a greater appreciation and understanding of ancient Egyptian culture when they do a virtual dissection and preservation of their own mummy. The differentiation of content requires adding more depth and complexity to curriculum rather than transmitting more or easier factual material. Expression-style preferences can be accommodated by giving students opportunities to communicate visually, graphically, artistically, and through animatronics, multimedia, and various community-service involvements.

The biggest enemies of differentiation are time and the over-prescription of learning. Before the availability of computers and the Internet, teachers simply did not have the time to find and direct customized resources to individual students. Our most recent work is an online personalized learning program that provides profiles of each student's academic strengths, interests, learning styles, and preferred modes of expression. This

unique program also has a search engine that matches multiply coded resources with student profiles. Teachers also use the program to select and infuse high engagement enrichment activities into any and all standardized curriculum topics. This resource can be found at https://renzullilearning.com.

Our obsession with content mastery and Skinner's behavioral theory of learning are slowly but surely giving way to an interest in personalization and differentiation. We can do the same thing to enrich the entire learning environment by capitalizing on a broader spectrum of learner characteristics, creating comprehensive computer-generated student profiles, and using the interactive capabilities of today's technology to revitalize learning.