

Making Personalisation Possible

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Contents

Explaining the Why.....	3
Personalisation Because Teaching Is Becoming Harder.....	4
Barriers To Expertise.....	5
Don't Focus on Data, Focus on Decisions.....	6
Personalisation Relies on Small Decisions, Small Data.....	7
The Data We Need To Collect.....	9
Managing a Personalised Classroom.....	12
The Power of Small Data.....	15

Personalisation is easy to pronounce and very hard to implement. A shift toward a personalised approach to teaching and learning is the stated aim of many schools and school districts. While desiring personalisation, the majority of classroom teachers cannot envisage a scenario where they believe it is possible to do while maintaining a reasonable workload and their sanity.

This short eBook is written for these teachers, the teachers wanting a practical path to personalisation.

The book starts by looking at why teaching and personalisation are difficult presently. Making the learning of each student visible through daily data will assist teachers. While better data and assessment is the key, the book goes on to point out that our focus should be the daily decisions that teachers make. Personalisation is fundamentally a strategy aimed at making each of the small decisions that teachers make better, improving education through enhancing each teacher-student interaction. Different data collection and assessment strategies are discussed. The book ends by bringing it all together with tips and strategies that teachers can use to make a personalised classroom manageable and sustainable.

There is no one right way to teach, and there is no one right way to implement a personalised classroom. This book was written with an aim of explaining the fundamentals of a personalised classroom so that you, the reader, can bring the knowledge and understanding of your own context to build upon these fundamentals to create a sustainable approach.

I wish you the best in your journey.

Peter Kent – March 2014

Personalisation Because Teaching Is Becoming Harder

A survey of over 600 educators found that 90% either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “Teaching is becoming harder”.

Teaching is getting harder – you will have to go a long way to find people to disagree with that statement. The variety and complexity of students’ needs within our classes has never been greater, and consequently, the traditional whole-class teaching approach is becoming less effective – that kind of teaching is getting harder.

Every day teachers need to make a crucial decision: **What is the most appropriate lesson for my class?** Whole-class teaching is based around a single lesson being delivered to a class of students. Within whole-class teaching, this question can have only one answer. The underlying assumption is that each person in the class is ready and able to learn the same concept and content at the same time, often in the same way.

It is becoming increasingly impossible for teachers to answer this question with a single response. For most teachers, in most classrooms, it is just not valid to assume that all students are the same from the position of their understanding of the curriculum. And we all know the consequence when teachers get this question wrong. If the lesson is inappropriate for students, at best there will have bored and disengaged students. More likely are behaviour issues in the classroom.

Teachers around the world are accepting the reality that in the typical classroom, the question “What is the most appropriate lesson for my class?” needs multiple answers. Different students are at different places with their learning, and so need differentiation within instruction. Differentiation is a concept most teachers are familiar with – personalisation is just differentiation done very, very well.

It is important to note that many people confuse “whole-class teaching” with “direct instruction”, and from this they assume that if whole-class teaching is a flawed strategy, then so too is direct instruction. THIS IS NOT THE CASE, DIRECT INSTRUCTION AND WHOLE-CLASS TEACHING ARE NOT THE SAME THING. Research has proven time and time again that direct instruction is a very effective teaching strategy, and one that we plan to use while implementing a personalised classroom – just not for all students at the same time.

“Expertise is irrelevant without information on current status.”

– Michael Fullan and Peter Hill

In London, trainee cab drivers ride around the city for an average of 34 months on motor scooters following maps. They are undertaking “the knowledge”, learning the streets of London and the best routes to take from one location to another. Once they have completed this, the taxi drivers of London have an expertise almost unparalleled elsewhere in the world.

However, if I were to blindfold a London cabbie, it is doubtful that he could find a landmark more than two streets away. Without any information on where he is, the expertise of a London cabbie quickly becomes irrelevant; even cab drivers continually need information on their current location to demonstrate their expertise.

The same is true in many other professions. We cannot expect meteorologists to accurately predict the weather without giving them information about the current weather conditions. Hospitals are continuously monitoring relevant vital statistics from patients. They do this so that medical professionals can perform to the full extent of their expertise; indeed there is an obligation to do so.

This notion that expertise is dependent on the quality and timeliness of information that a professional is provided is a key concept that has to be addressed as we personalise instruction. Teachers are highly-skilled professionals. However, their ability to display their expertise, to provide each student with the instruction and guidance that he or she needs, and to do this on a daily basis, is limited by the information they have access to. This fact is one of the main reasons why teachers claim that whole-class teaching is becoming more difficult. As the variety of students' needs in our class increases, a whole-class teaching approach hides the individual strengths and weaknesses of students from the teacher. It makes it more difficult for teachers to understand the needs of their students and respond accordingly – it makes it more difficult for teachers to teach.

Only when it is possible for teachers to have visibility over student learning on a daily basis will it be possible for teachers to design and implement precise learning for students.

Don't Focus on Data, Focus on Decisions

Data outside the context of a decision is just trivia.

Earlier this year I was given a FitBit smart activity tracker. I wear it on my wrist, and it tracks my step, distance travelled, calories burnt, and the amount of time I have been active - all giving me real-time data on my phone. When I wear the wrist band at night, it will also track my sleep patterns, telling me how long I slept, showing me the periods when I was restless and when I awoke during the night. This sleep tracking is a feature that is promoted heavily, but for me it is useless information, trivia.

The data I get around step, distance, calories, etc. is useful to me. It tells me how active I have been and helps me to decide whether I need to be more active, go for a walk, or whether I am on track to meet my daily expectations for myself. The data around my sleep, while moderately interesting, does not inform any of the decisions I make in my daily life.

John Hattie said “data cannot exist in a vacuum”. If the data you collect and the assessment you perform are not related to teaching decisions, then it is likely just trivia.

The use of data is integral to implementing a personalised mode of teaching and learning. All too often, teachers undertake assessments and collect data that do not really inform important teaching decisions. Often students are not assessed until the end of the unit – in this context the assessment is more of a “post-mortem” than a formative tool. The patient is already dead. The information, while interesting, does not inform a decision. The obvious next question to ask then is what decisions are important in the daily life of teachers.

What decisions will assist us in implementing personalised learning and determining what assessment strategies are needed to support these decisions will be the topic of the next chapter.

“Saruman believes it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I have found. I found it is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love.” – Gandalf (from the movie The Hobbit)

What is teaching if it is not continuous small acts of kindness (instruction, advice, encouragement) in a context of support where it is okay for individuals to make mistakes and reveal weaknesses?

Personalised learning is not so much about the big decisions that we make in the classroom. Personalisation is achieved in the small everyday questions and decisions that teachers make. When I started teaching, and even today, teachers were encouraged to plan for the term ahead. Yet, no advice was given on how to manage the next five minutes of a lesson or how to make the next conversation with a student as effective and productive as it could possibly be. Long-term planning is still necessary to add structure to our classes, but it is the small decisions that guide the next five minutes that allow us to personalise learning and make us effective.

So what are these “small everyday decisions” that will allow us to personalise our teaching? On a daily basis, teachers need to make decisions about the flow of their lessons:

- To what extent does each student understand the concepts of the lesson?
- Which students “get it” and which should continue consolidating?
- What is the next question I should ask, and to whom should I ask it?
- Is this lesson meeting the needs of the girls in my class, or the boys, gifted students, students with learning difficulties, those from non-English speaking background, etc.?

It is possible to continue to go on categorising different demographics, but you realise that they all end up narrowing down to the ultimate demographic - the individual. To fully personalise our lessons, teachers need to be able to decide with a high degree of accuracy “In the next five to fifteen minutes, what is the best support, instruction or question I can provide to Declan, Hannah, Joss, Inge, Deanne, etc., and which student(s) is it most productive or urgent that I speak to first?” These questions are important; they are the right questions, because they are aimed precisely at

Personalisation Relies on Small Decisions, Small Data

future action that is designed to progress the learning of individual students. If we can make each five minutes in class as effective as they can possibly be, then just how effective will our lessons be? Our week be? How productive will our year be? It certainly puts into perspective the decisions such as whether we should move the class from fractions to decimals in the fourth or fifth week into the term.

However, the astute reader will notice there is a problem. We have no reliable data to inform the next five minutes of the class. The student who gets the next support, instruction, or question is often the loudest or most boisterous, which is hardly the precise decision making that we hope for. This situation does reinforce the problem raised in the previous chapter: if we look first at the data and then decide how best to act given the data we have, we miss the most important teaching decisions. However, if we define the important questions first, we are then in a position to define and collect the data that we need.

This is where this series is now: we have defined the questions we believe to be important. The next article will give us a guide as to how to collect the data we need to be able to answer these questions, to make each and every five minutes as productive as they can be and personalise our classrooms.

If we rephrase Gandalf into a personalised learning context:

“Many believe it is only Big Data combined with standardised assessment tools that can enable personalised learning, but that is not what I have found. I found it is the small everyday decisions of teachers that enable the learning of individual students, a continuous series of teachers’ small deeds of support, instruction and questioning.”

Perhaps this is why *The Hobbit* is about wizards and dragons and not about teachers...

Teachers in a personalised classroom need detailed data about their students.

Teaching is not one or two big decisions made on a weekly basis; rather, it is a collection of small decisions made continually throughout lessons. When teachers can collect data that allows them to improve the multitude of small decisions, it will be possible to greatly improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning and to genuinely implement a sustainable model of personalised learning.

But what are these small decisions that lead to personalised teaching and learning, the decisions that should guide our data collection? Fundamentally, the constant decision that all teachers need to make throughout each lesson is:

- Who is in the greatest need of my time? What assistance/support/instruction/guidance do they need?

The other decision that teachers need to make in preparation for each lesson is:

- What is the most appropriate learning intention or learning goal for each student at this point in time? (Note: In order for students to be able to take ownership and control of their learning, this is a question that they should be regularly reflecting on as well).

So here we are. We know what decisions need to guide the implementation of personalised learning. We now have to collect the data and act upon it. This is where the rubber hits the road.

How to Collect the Data:

Generally the best way to find out what students know is to ask them. Is the best way to find out what help they need to ask them as well? Sounds simple, and I wish it was. Like in most things, there is a catch, or more accurately, some essential preparation to be done before we can ask these questions and expect useful responses. Let's start with the second question first because it is the most important and there is so much useful information we can get from student responses to it.

- What is the most appropriate learning intention or learning goal for each student at this point in time?

The Data We Need To Collect

Teachers need to be able to use the answer to this question to set learning intentions or learning goals for their next lesson, or to provide precise guidance to a student within a lesson. In this context, the answer to this question will ideally be in the form of a learning goal for the subject or course at hand (Note: I find that around the world there is a range of jargon to describe classes, subjects, courses, curriculum outcomes, curriculum standards, unit plans, courses of study, learning progressions, etc.).

To ensure that students can answer this question, teachers need to make visible to students the set of learning intentions or curriculum standards (or more likely sub-standards) that will be covered over the coming period (usually between five and ten weeks, but it could be more or less depending on how the curriculum program is organised).

Once this set of learning intentions is visible to students, ideally with examples of what success looks like at each stage, all that students are required to do is identify the most appropriate learning intention by selecting it from the list. By presenting students with a list of the learning intentions to be covered at the end of each lesson and asking them which one they are currently working on, teachers are able to very accurately make precise decisions about what is the best lesson for their classes tomorrow.

Teachers need to ask this question every lesson. Students need to get into the habit of reflecting on their personal progress through the curriculum during every lesson. If students expect the question to be asked, then they will naturally prepare themselves to answer during the lesson and consequently get better at answering and better at identifying their own specific learning needs.

A course of study aimed at lasting ten weeks might contain eight to ten major learning intentions, potentially 15 - 20 if we can break some into component parts. So while teachers would ask the question each lesson, it would not be expected for students to change their answers each lesson. The number of days that a student has been working on a specific learning intention can help us answer our first question:

- Who is in the greatest need of my time? What assistance / support / instruction / guidance do they need?

The Data We Need To Collect

Students who have been “stuck” on a specific learning intention for more days than desired or planned clearly may be in urgent need of assistance and intervention. Students who have just moved to a new learning intention will most likely benefit from an initial orientation and direct instruction. So by monitoring the rate of learning and the time it takes for individual students to move from one learning intention to the next, we can identify the students that potentially have the greatest need of our time on any particular day. There are a lot more questions we can ask students to find valuable data to personalise teaching and learning:

- Today our lesson intention was on... (to see if they were paying attention)
- To what extent was the lesson's work easy?
- What is your score on the progress rubric? (In this instance the teacher might have used a rubric to define what needs to be learnt.)
- What content would you like to revise next lesson?

However, everything is best done one step at a time, so it may be best to just begin with the initial question, "What learning intention are you currently working on?", and then progress from there, adding more questions at your own pace.

We are in a position where we can identify the most appropriate personalised learning goal for each student on a daily basis. We also have a very good idea of which students would be in the greatest need of our time – fantastic. The obvious problem is that I now have a class of 25-30 students each potentially working on a different learning goal each day. How on earth are we going to manage that without going insane? That is topic of the next chapter.

Managing a Personalised Classroom

Be prepared.

We left the last chapter with a strategy to collect the data so that we can answer the questions required for personalisation: What is the most appropriate learning goal for each student? Who is in the greatest need of my time? What assistance/support/instruction/guidance do they need? The last thing we need to cover is how we are going to manage our classroom to personalise the learning without going insane or trying to teach 25 different lessons each day.

As with most problems, the answer involves being prepared.

To manage a personalised classroom, it is easiest if teachers think in terms of a five-to-ten week course of study. This course of study might cover three or four curriculum standards and may contain eight to ten major learning intentions that can potentially be broken down into 15-20 component learning goals.

You will recall that the strategy to answer the question “What is the most appropriate learning goal for each student?” was to ask the students at the end of each lesson which learning goal they were up to, providing students with clear work samples and examples of success at each goal, so that they have the capacity to self-assess.

In order to act on this information, we, as teachers, need to have pre-prepared a range of learning activities or tasks for students for each component learning goal. With these activities pre-prepared, the daily task of the teacher is to match the appropriate activity with the appropriate students, and then decide which students are in the most need of direct instruction or support.

There are some tips and strategies around the design of the activities to make this process even more manageable:

1. **Design activities that cover two or three learning goals and would realistically take students three to five days to complete.** If activities are shorter than this, it can become overwhelming, as potentially, the teacher will need to give each student a new activity every other day and will spend all their time orientating students to new activities,

rather than helping students with learning difficulties. If activities are longer than this, students can get bogged down within the activity and procrastinate. Tip: Generally, younger students need shorter activities.

- 2. Design the activities as a series of challenges associated with each component learning goal.** Remember that at the end of each lesson, students will be asked which learning goal they are currently working on. As such, we need to make it clear within the activity which challenge relates to which learning goal.
- 3. Design the activities to facilitate student self-assessment.** For each learning goal and each challenge, there has to be a clear definition of success. All too often we give students tasks and problems to solve, without being clear what success looks like. For example, the task "Discuss the factors that led to the American Civil War" could be answered with a couple of sentences, or 10,000 words. How is the student to know what success looks like? Tip: A combination of explicit assessment rubrics and work samples is usually sufficient to guide student self-assessment.
- 4. Flip your classroom.** While a flipped classroom has a range of definitions, in this context I mean digitise your direct instruction so that students can view it outside of the lesson, allowing them to spend class time working on activities. While a flipped classroom is generally a good strategy in all circumstances, it is of increased value in a personalised learning environment. When we have our direct instruction and orientation to activities digitised as video, a podcast, or even as a Word document or PowerPoint™ presentation, it becomes easy to assign students new activities. Students will also be able to view the direct instruction over and over again, as much as they need to first learn, then reinforce and revise their learning. If they are having a problem understanding the activity or a challenge, their first solution could be to re-orientate by re-watching the orientation podcast or PowerPoint presentation.
- 5. Work as a team.** If it is not clear by now, you will need at least five complete activity packages ready before you start the first lesson. With each activity consisting of a direct instruction and orientation component, detailed rubrics, examples of success, the activities of the task itself and any support materials required, that could be a lot of work. But if you work as a team of three or four teachers, each with one curriculum standard to cover and only one or two activity packages to create, life starts becoming a lot more manageable.

Managing a Personalised Classroom

One of the long-term advantages of this approach is that once you have an activity package created, it can be easily reused and will probably have a life of three or four years.

- 6. Ease yourself into personalisation.** If you cannot work as a team, and even if you can, it is sometimes a good idea to spend a year preparing for personalisation. As you teach the various curriculum standards this year, be mindful to create activities and challenges that can be used again in future years. Be sure to create detailed rubrics and road-test them with students to ensure that they can use them to self-assess. As you progress through the year, be mindful to collect student work samples that can be used as examples of success at each learning goal and curriculum standard. Experiment with flipping your classroom in a whole-class teaching context and learn how to make videos or podcasts of your direct instruction. If we teach this year being mindful that we need to collate our work to create activity packages for each curriculum standard when we commence next year, we will be well prepared to personalise our classroom.
- 7. Be persistent, and don't give up.** There is a phrase I use with the schools I work with – “First go, worst go” (for you Americans, “First try, worst try”). That is, the first time you do anything will be the worst time you do it. If you quit after your first go, then “worst” is as good as you will ever be. If we adopt the attitude of reflective learning, preparing ourselves, having a go, reflecting and then continually improving on our performance, then before we know it we will have gone way past “worst” and will have become highly effective teachers, ensuring that each student's learning needs are met each lesson.

Generally, these are the strategies and tactics to personalise learning in your classroom. All that is left to do is as they say – just do it. I will add to that by encouraging you to have fun as you go. There is nothing more sustainable and more positive than teachers who enjoy their work.

The final chapter will look beyond the curriculum. As an example, we will look at how some of the approaches that we have talked about can help teachers personalise their approach to managing relationships in the classroom, amongst other things.

Relationships are everything

Personalisation is really just the ability to make precise teaching decisions—precise at the level of the individual student and precise to the level of daily lessons, and even individual conversations.

In this book we have explored the specific teaching decisions that enable a shift to personalised learning, we have looked at strategies to collect the data required to inform these decisions, and we have outlined how to organise the classrooms to make personalising teaching and learning manageable. All of this we did in the context of personalising the curriculum, because at the end of the day the curriculum is the core business of teachers. However, it is not the only thing that teachers need to concern themselves with.

For me, even more critical than the curriculum standards are the relationships within the classroom, the well-being of my students. No matter how well I plan a lesson, a student who is upset, angry, frightened, being bullied, etc. is never going to learn. The following is an extract from a post that I saw on Facebook. The post was from someone called Sharon Grammer Stone. I am realistic; it is Facebook, so this story may not be true. That being said, it could be true. It would not be that hard to do, and it is certainly a perfect example of how regularly asking the same question and gathering small data can be incredibly powerful in personalising your teaching for the individual needs of students.

“Every Friday afternoon Chase’s teacher asks her students to take out a piece of paper and write down the names of four children with whom they’d like to sit the following week. The children know that these requests may or may not be honored. She also asks the students to nominate one student whom they believe has been an exceptional classroom citizen that week. All ballots are privately submitted to her.

And every single Friday afternoon, after the students go home, Chase’s teacher takes out those slips of paper, places them in front of her and studies them. She looks for patterns.

- *Who is not getting requested by anyone else?*
- *Who doesn’t even know who to request?*

The Power of Small Data

- *Who never gets noticed enough to be nominated?*
- *Who had a million friends last week and none this week?*

You see, Chase's teacher is not looking for a new seating chart or "exceptional citizens." Chase's teacher is looking for lonely children. She's looking for children who are struggling to connect with other children. She's identifying the little ones who are falling through the cracks of the class's social life. She is discovering whose gifts are going unnoticed by their peers. And she's pinning down right away- who's being bullied and who is doing the bullying.

As Chase's teacher explained this simple, ingenious idea – I stared at her with my mouth hanging open. "How long have you been using this system?" I said.

"Ever since Columbine," she said. "Every single Friday afternoon since Columbine."

The full Facebook post can be found at:

www.facebook.com/sharon.grammerstone/posts/10201414426787789

There is so much we can do with small data. We are only limited by our dreams. So dream big and imagine a better world — then make it happen.



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