



Technology Helps Teachers, It Doesn't Replace Them

The following is an article from Education Week that shows how teachers across the country are using technology in the classroom to individualize instruction and better meet the needs of today's generation of students.

Schools Use Digital Tools to Customize Education

By Michelle R. Davis

Education Week

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In today's digital marketplace, students of all ages can create experiences tailored just for them. When a teenager searches for movies to watch, an online film site can provide suggestions based on past viewing history. Music lovers can create personalized playlists for everything from a workout in the gym to a study session. And when children play video games, they can choose a variety paths—based on their interests and skill levels—toward slaying a dragon or defeating an enemy.

Then many of these same students walk into their classrooms and sit at their desks to absorb one-size-fits-all lessons or, if they're lucky, instruction aimed at the high-, mid-, or low-level learner. And in many cases, there is little, if any, technology integrated into those lessons.

In some pockets around the country, though, educators and schools are turning to technology and different teaching and learning approaches to give students a personalized learning experience that mirrors the customized experiences they take for granted in their lives outside of school.

Teachers are using "intelligent" assessments that allow students to skip concepts they already know to focus on those they struggle with; teachers are also collecting student data to craft lesson plans based on student interests and educational needs; other educators are letting students fulfill curriculum requirements by doing everything from writing a traditional essay to creating a video or a website; and online-course providers are allowing students to go as fast or slow as they need to grasp material.

"In regular, face-to-face classrooms, it's very difficult to create an individual experience for each student unless you can make the learning independent but also interactive," says Jeff Snyder, a former classroom social studies teacher who is now an assistant principal with the Jefferson County, Ky., public schools' eSchool, an online school with more than 6,000 students. "Technology allows students to go in their own direction, which is really difficult to do in a classroom with 30 different kids at 30 different levels in 50 minutes."

Personalized Paths

As the move toward personalization unfolds, those in the forefront say it can raise students' interest in learning, help them follow their passions, and ultimately boost achievement. Anecdotal evidence of the success of this approach is

building, though research on using technology to personalize instruction is still struggling to catch up with practice.

Experts caution that personalization doesn't always mean catering to each and every student's individual whims.

"The kind of personalization that is valuable in education is not complete and total personalization, which would be pandering," says Vikram Savkar, a senior vice president and publishing director at the New York City-based Nature Publishing Group, which has created an online science-based social-networking site called [Scitable](#). The site allows students to discuss scientific topics and connect with researchers.

"In education," says Savkar, "it's not about giving students what they want, it's about a recommended learning path just for them."

Many teachers have been trying to personalize education in one way or another for decades. But they've been hampered by the hours needed to prepare such lessons, class-time limits, and the number of students they serve.

Until new technologies arrived on the scene, true educational personalization "has been a manual, tedious, laborious process," says Julie Young, the president and chief executive officer of the 97,000-student Florida Virtual School, based in Orlando.

A host of new devices and programs, such as 1-to-1 laptop initiatives, online courses, digital lessons, interactive tools, and smart assessments, have shown learning can take place at all hours of the day or night and at different levels—or even subjects—within the same classroom. The new technology takes the old model of personalization and makes it more scalable, Young suggests.

But that doesn't mean students should be totally in charge of their own learning, Young says. "This does not mean a teacherless environment," she says. "On the contrary, it means you need an even more talented teacher who can think creatively and guide students."

Definition Evolving

A growing number of schools and programs across the country are trying to make it work. New York City's School of One program uses technology and teachers to tailor lessons each day based on students' individual strengths and weaknesses. The Florida Virtual School's online courses often give students a choice of how they want to progress through a course, which topics they want to tackle first, and whether they want to use text, video, audio, or simulations to absorb the material. The North Carolina initiative [Project K-Nect](#) uses smartphones to provide students with opportunities to help each other solve math problems at their own pace through social-networking sites created specifically for math.

But an understanding of just what personalization through technology means, and definitive research into which strategies and tactics work best, are still evolving, says Yong Zhao, the director of the Center for Advanced Technology in

Education based at the University of Oregon in Eugene. “Personalized learning is very hard to measure,” he says. “The objectives are so diverse and varied.” In the end, the goal should be fostering students who are lifelong learners—not just students who have learned the formula for getting good grades in school, says Savkar of the Nature Publishing Group. “We want to inspire intellectual curiosity and those mental skills that students will carry with them their whole lives,” he says. “That’s the most important thing.”

Index of Daily Updates

1:1 Mobile Computing Devices

- [Myths Heard in JFAC Friday](#)
- [Technology for All](#)
- [1:1 Mobile Computing Device](#)
- [Are Idaho’s Parents and Teacher Really Together?](#)

Class Sizes

- [Myths Heard in JFAC Friday](#)
- [Are Idaho’s Parents and Teacher Really Together?](#)
- [More Myths Dispelled about Students Come First](#)
- [District Flexibility on Class Size](#)

Consolidation

- [District consolidation](#)

Local Control

- [Are Idaho’s Parents and Teacher Really Together?](#)
- [More Myths Dispelled about Students Come First](#)
- [Local Control](#)

Miscellaneous

- [Call for Civil Discourse](#)
- [Excerpts from House Debate on SB 1108 and 1110](#)

Online Learning

- [Myths Heard in JFAC Friday](#)
- [Online Learning](#)
- [Are Idaho’s Parents and Teacher Really Together?](#)
- [More Myths Dispelled about Students Come First](#)
- [Innovative Use of Technology and Online Learning](#)

Pay-for-Performance

- [Myths Heard in JFAC Friday](#)
- [More Myths Dispelled about Students Come First](#)
- [Common Questions About Pay-for-Performance](#)

Seniority

- [The Facts about Fair and Effective Labor Practices](#)
- [Seniority](#)

Support for Students Comes First

- [Bipartisan Support](#)
- [Support and Momentum](#)
- [Albertson Foundation Support](#)
- [IBCEE and IACI Support](#)
- [Public Support](#)

Technology

- [Innovative Use of Technology and Online Learning](#)

Tenure

- [Teacher Tenure](#)
- [The Facts about Fair and Effective Labor Practices](#)

Why Students Come First?

- [Why do we need to change the system?](#)
- [Idaho can become a national leader without taking federal bailouts](#)
- [In Idaho, Students Come First](#)