

Beyond Buzzwords

Defining Differentiation, Individualization and Personalization

by Weston Kieschnick

It is impossible to overstate the impact blended learning *should* be having on teaching and learning. Digital tools have the potential to do for classrooms what the Internet did for humanity: allow access to the things we need almost anywhere, at any time, accompanied by an omnipresent availability of information, collaboration, and engaging experiences. As such, digital tools can help us deliver on the promise of classrooms where differentiation, individualization, and personalization are the norm. So why aren't they?

Many of these tools have existed for a decade or more. Where is the learning transformation we were promised? In short, this learning transformation is languishing in a quagmire of perplexing buzzwords and terminologies that are causing more confusion than clarity for many classroom teachers. Most still struggle to define these terms, much less implement them in their classrooms. In that sense, they are merely buzzwords. And as educators, it is not buzzwords that will impact student achievement, but rather a concrete understanding of these terms accompanied by execution that leads to change.

Blended learning has the power to transform teaching and learning by creating rigorous and relevant opportunities for learning in the classroom. However, before we can execute and deliver, we must have a common definition of these buzzwords that permeate our field. Here are ways masterful teachers and administrators can succinctly answer questions around blended learning, specifically differentiation, individualization, and personalization.

What is Blended Learning?

Blended learning is a student-centered methodology designed to provide students control of time, place, path, and/or pace through the purposeful alignment of traditional teaching practices and technology-enabled learning opportunities. Blended learning creates opportunities for teachers to **reimagine the learning environment** in support of relevant learning practices and increased engagement.

What is Differentiation?

Our first line of defense in eliminating the opportunity and achievement gaps is differentiation. How can technologies equip educators with tools to plan for different learning styles and preferences and provide a multitude of experiences through which they can achieve mastery? Instead of asking why students don't *learn* the way we *teach*, we should ask ourselves how we can *teach* the way students *learn*. Let's increasingly *adapt to students*, instead of expecting *students to adapt to us*. What different text sources can we utilize to improve engagement? How can we improve access to rich multimedia and make it a vital part of our learning experiences? What opportunities can empower staff and students to utilize social media platforms for academic collaboration? **It is far more important for students to leave our classrooms more masterful at a thing they've never done than it is for teachers to leave more masterful at a thing they've always done.**

What is Individualization?

Individualization plays a critical role within the system of supports that schools must define to meet all student needs and to ensure that all students learn at high levels. In a sense, individualization is less an instructional practice and more a system of assessing and determining what each individual student needs. **It is the gateway through which teachers transition to personalized learning practices.**

Blended learning pedagogies include models for whole group instructional experiences that serve heterogeneous groups of students and individualized supports during which teams provide more time and alternative ways for students to master priorities with which they are struggling. Individualization requires evidence. But assessment, done right and collectively analyzed, takes time.

Enter technology tools. Educational technology gives us the opportunity to generate in-the-moment data analytics that were previously unavailable. **Kahoot**,

Google Forms, Poll Everywhere, Padlet, Google Docs, Socrative and dozens of other digital resources provide feedback on students' responses to our instruction and intervention. When we collect, and more importantly, use this information to inform future teaching, learning and individualized experiences based on students' responses to first, best instruction, we begin to realize the full potential of digital tools to create individualized learning experiences. Furthermore, **individualization is the medium through which students will ultimately take ownership over their own learning goals so that they can monitor their progress**, as opposed to waiting from week to week for the teacher to tell them where they stand.

What is Personalization?

Personalization is a function of blended learning and individualization. Because the latter exists, the former is possible. It is an adaptive model of instruction, placing complete focus on customizing all aspects of the learning process for each student. Personalization enables students to self-select the methods for acquiring new knowledge and demonstrating competency, all while placing them at the center of the data-driven decisions about their progress and needs. While differentiation leverages collaborative learning to build student mastery of essential skills and concepts, **personalization targets specific student needs, passions, and learning preferences.**

With precision, we can utilize digital assessments and resources to provide targeted supports for individual students in ways that are efficient and effective. We have the capability to use YouTube, Khan Academy, educational apps, game-based learning, OpenCourseWare, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and an assortment of other tools along with traditional best practices to provide engaging, asynchronous instruction for kids, in a way that accounts for their individual proficiency needs. This allows teachers to extend their own capacity within the walls of the classroom and beyond the time constraints of the school day. In short, **we can use digital tools to personalize learning experiences so that each child receives the exact interventions they need at the exact time they need them.**

Technology is a force multiplier; when coupled with progressive pedagogies and practice, digital tools and resources enhance both intervention and enrichment, expanding opportunities for students at various times, in various spaces, at various rates, and in various ways.

Blended learning, simply stated, is technologically enhanced **differentiation**. The assessment opportunities that digital tools provide allow teachers *and* students to quickly and efficiently determine proficiency gaps so they can collaborate and set **individualized** goals for achievement. Once they have done so, they can create a **personalized** environment whereby synchronous, asynchronous, digital, and traditional strategies support the student on the path to proficiency. When this path is executed with fidelity, these buzzwords may finally allow us deliver on the promises of equity and achievement for all.

About the Author

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