



Personalizing Classroom Instruction

(<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/personalizing.pdf>)

The old adage: *Meet learners where they are* captures the commonsense view of good classroom practices. Unfortunately, this adage often is interpreted only as a call for *matching* a student's current *capabilities* (e.g., knowledge and skills). The irony, of course, is that most school staff know that motivational factors (e.g., attitudes) play a key role in poor instructional outcomes. One of the most frequent laments about students is: "They could do it, if only they *wanted* to!"

We all also know that good abilities are more likely to emerge when students are motivated not only to pursue assignments, but also are interested in using what they learn. The point for emphasis is that good classroom practices involve matching *motivation* (especially *intrinsic* motivation), and this often involves overcoming *avoidance* motivation.

With respect to facilitating learning, the desire to meet learners where they are sometimes is referred to as the concept of the "match" or the problem of "fit." Schools strive to design instruction that fits, but the reality is that they can only approximate an optimal fit. And, a close approximation probably requires *personalizing instruction*.

Defining Personalization. For some time, efforts to improve instructional fit in the classroom have revolved around the concepts of individualized or personalized instruction. The two concepts overlap in their emphasis on developmental differences. That is, most *individualized* approaches stress individual differences in developmental capability. *Personalization*, however, is defined as the process of accounting for individual differences in *both capability and motivation*.

Personalization needs to be understood as a psychological construct. From a motivational perspective, the *learner's perception* is a critical factor in defining whether the environment is a good fit. Given this, it is important to ensure learning opportunities are *perceived by learners* as good ways to reach their goals. Thus, a basic assessment concern is that of eliciting learners' perceptions of how well what is offered matches both their interests and abilities.

Assumptions and Elements. Outlined in the Exhibit on page 4 are underlying assumptions and major elements of personalized classrooms. Properly designed and carried out, personalizing instruction can be sufficient in facilitating classroom learning for most students, and this reduces the need for specialized assistance.

Personalizing regular classroom programs also can improve the effectiveness of prevention, inclusion, and prereferral interventions. In such classrooms, personalization represents a regular classroom application of the principle of using the least intervention that is needed (which encompasses the concept of "least restrictive environment").

Enhancing Motivation is a Core Concern

Student support staff can contribute greatly by helping ensure that classrooms address motivation as a primary consideration. Instruction should be based on an appreciation of what is likely to affect a student's positive and negative motivation to learn. The emphasis on motivation has fundamental intervention implications. In particular, it calls for offering a broad range of content, outcome, and procedural *options*, including a personalized structure to facilitate learning. With real options comes real opportunities for *involving learners in decision making*. A motivational focus also stresses development of nonthreatening ways to provide information about learning and performance.

Many instructional approaches are effective when a student is motivated to learn what is being taught. For students with learning, behavior, and emotional problems, however, motivation for classroom learning often is a problem. The roots of significant learning problems are planted when instruction is not a good fit. In turn, learning problems generate an emotional overlay and usually behavior problems. Thus, while motivation is a fundamental concern for all students, for those with problems a classroom focus on motivation is essential.

In transforming classrooms, the following points about motivation warrant particular attention:

(1) *Optimal performance and learning require motivational readiness.* Motivation is a key antecedent condition in any learning situation. Readiness is understood in terms of offering stimulating and supportive environments where learning can be perceived as vivid, valued, and attainable. It is a prerequisite to student attention, involvement, and performance. Poor motivational readiness may be a cause of poor learning and a factor maintaining learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Thus, the need for strategies that can produce a high level of motivational readiness (and reduce avoidance motivation and reactance) so students are mobilized to participate.

(2) *Motivation represents both a process and an outcome concern.* Individuals may value learning something, but may not be motivated to pursue the processes used. Many students are motivated to learn when they first encounter a topic but do not maintain that motivation. Processes must elicit, enhance, and maintain motivation so that students stay mobilized. Programs must be designed to maintain, enhance, and expand intrinsic motivation so that what is learned is not limited to immediate lessons and is applied in the world beyond the schoolhouse door.

Negative motivation and avoidance reactions and any conditions likely to generate them must be circumvented or at least minimized. Of particular concern are activities students perceive as unchallenging, uninteresting, overdemanding, or overwhelming. We all react against structures that seriously limit our range of options or that are overcontrolling and coercive. Examples of conditions that can have a negative impact on a person's motivation are sparse resources, excessive rules, and a restrictive day-in, day-out emphasis on drill and remediation.

Students experiencing problems at school usually have extremely negative perceptions of and avoidance tendencies toward teachers and activities that look like "the same old thing." Major changes in approach must be made if such students are to change these perceptions. Ultimately, success may depend on the degree to which the students view the adults at school and in the classroom as supportive, rather than indifferent or controlling and the program as personally valuable and obtainable.

(3) *School staff not only need to try to increase motivation – especially intrinsic motivation – but also to avoid practices that decrease it.* Although students may learn a specific lesson at school (e.g., some basic skills), they may have little or no interest in using the new knowledge and skills outside of the classroom. Increasing such interest requires procedures that can reduce negative and increase positive feelings, thoughts, and coping strategies.

With learning, behavior, and emotional problems, it is especially important to identify and minimize experiences that maintain or may increase avoidance motivation. Of particular concern is the need to avoid overreliance on extrinsics to entice and reward since such strategies can decrease intrinsic motivation.

The point is to enhance stable, positive, intrinsic attitudes that mobilize ongoing pursuit of desired ends, throughout the school, and away from school. Developing intrinsic attitudes is basic to increasing the type of motivated practice, for example reading for pleasure, that is essential for mastering and assimilating what has just been learned.

Underlying Assumptions and Major Program Elements of a Personalized Program

I. Underlying Assumptions

The following are basic assumptions underlying personalized programs as we conceive them.

- Learning is a function of the ongoing transactions between the learner and the learning environment.
- Optimal learning is a function of an optimal match between the learner's accumulated capacities and attitudes and current state of being and the program's processes and context.
- Matching both learner motivation and capacities must be primary procedural objectives.
- The learner's perception is the critical criterion for evaluating whether a good match or fit exists between the learner and the learning environment.
- The wider the range of options that can be offered and the more the learner is made aware of the options and has a choice about which to pursue, the greater the likelihood that he or she will perceive the match as a good one.
- Besides improved learning, personalized programs enhance intrinsic valuing of learning and a sense of personal responsibility for learning. Furthermore, such programs increase acceptance and even appreciation of individual differences, as well as independent and cooperative functioning and problem solving.

II. Program Elements

Major elements of personalized programs as we have identified them are:

- turning large classes into small units (many small group and individual learning opportunities)
- in-classroom collaboration and teaming
- regular use of informal and formal conferences for discussing options, making decisions, exploring learners' perceptions, and mutually evaluating progress;
- a broad range of options from which learners can make choices with regard to types of learning content, processes, needed support and guidance, and desired outcomes;
- active decision making by learners in making choices (with appropriate guidance and support) and in evaluating how well the chosen options match their motivation and capability;
- establishment of program plans and mutual agreements about the ongoing relationships between the learners and the program personnel;
- regular reevaluations of decisions, reformulation of plans, and renegotiation of agreements based on mutual evaluations of progress, problems, and learners' perceptions of the "match."

Personalization First; Add Special Assistance If Necessary

A sequential and hierarchical framework can guide efforts to provide a good match and determine the most appropriate and least disruptive intervention needed for individuals with learning and behavior problems. The first step focuses on changing regular classrooms if they are not designed to personalize instruction. The changes are meant to create a caring context for learning and introduce personalized instruction to ensure that the program is highly responsive to learner differences in motivation and development.

With this in place, the next step involves providing special assistance as needed. That is, the second step is introduced only if learners continue to have problems. As outlined in the figure on the next page, this second step involves three levels of focus.

Concluding Comments

Working in classrooms is a highly demanding job. It is particularly difficult in school settings where a large proportion of the student body are not performing well.

The problem of improving classrooms is exacerbated by the growing teacher shortage. More and more schools must employ novices, including individuals with little or no preservice teacher preparation. And many of these newcomers are placed in schools where a large proportion of students come to class each day not particularly enthusiastic about what they are expected to do and often without the background of knowledge and skills to connect with the day's lesson plans.

The reality is that increasing numbers of teachers have not had the opportunity to learn how to teach students who manifest commonplace learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Given this state of affairs, it is essential to transform classrooms into settings where many are working with the teacher in the classroom to enable students to get around barriers that interfere with learning and teaching and (re)engage in classroom instruction.

For more on this see:

> *Enhancing Classroom Approaches for Addressing Barriers to Learning: Classroom-Focused Enabling*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contedu/cfe.pdf>

> Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2006). *The Implementation Guide to Student Learning Supports: New Directions for Addressing Barriers to Learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

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