12 Strategies to Personalize Learning
A Crowdsourced Anthology of Strategies from Real Education Professionals
A Word From the Editors

There are a multitude of definitions for personalized learning. In fact, every district or school has a different definition or vision of what personalized learning means for their students.

We asked the community three questions:

1. How do you personalize learning in your district or school (strategy)?
2. What changes in student engagement or student learning have you seen?
3. What advice would you give to someone who is just starting out with personalized learning?

To keep things consistent we asked what category their personalized learning strategy is related to (based on INACOL).

This eBook was created to provide, fun and effective personalized learning strategies in the classroom for students or teachers. It’s a compilation of ideas directly the Schoology community—diverse educators from across the country.

Let’s personalize learning for every student in America.
I love to empower student choice by leading students to generate questions about our essential question for an upcoming theme or lesson study. Students have choice in the primary sources they will use to investigate and research the essential question. Another way student choice is fostered with my students is for the majority of lessons/activities, students decide how they will display their learning. Whether it is creating a video, writing poetry, directing a short play, using green screen, or coding, for each activity students get to choose a different way to showcase their learning. Student choice does not stop there. With flexible seating options, students choose where to sit throughout the day in order to successfully navigate the day and staying engaged in their learning.

**What changes in student engagement or student learning have you seen since using personalized approaches to learning?**

Student engagement exponentially increased overnight. Students were discussing more with each and in larger groups. Students were eager to present their creations, not only with their classmates, but with their global peers. One parent continued to emphasize how her son did not enjoy school until his time with me. Because he was not a fan of writing, he struggled in school. Because he had the option to code his work, not only was he engaged and loved coming to work, when the choice was mine for students and they had required writing, he participated, completed his assignment, and was eager to share. Instant buy-in!

**What advice would you give to someone who’s just starting out with PL or what resource, activity, or tool would you recommend for someone who wants to try personalizing learning?**

If you are starting out for the first time, start small. Set out a various primary sources and let students choose the one that speaks to them. Have them generate questions, notices, and details that speaks to them. Try choice with a partner, in a triad, and in group of 4 or 5. Each week try something new that allows choice and ALWAYS debrief as a class about the process: What worked, what could they do individually and as a class differently next time, lingering questions about the process, and future suggestions.
Building Masters of the Universe

I have used elements of gamification and self-paced mastery to implement anytime anywhere professional learning for our teachers and staff through self-paced online modules created in Schoology. This also mirrors expectations we have of how teachers should utilize Schoology with their students.

What changes in student engagement or student learning have you seen since using personalized approaches to learning?

As teachers have implemented more and more personalized learning strategies as well as designing self-paced mastery units in Schoology, we have noticed an increase in student engagement, as well as a strengthening of basic skills and prerequisites as students are required to master these before being able to move on to the next part.

What advice would you give to someone who’s just starting out with PL or what resource, activity, or tool would you recommend for someone who wants to try personalizing learning?

Think about how you can differentiate to the majority and one thing you can control is time. This is the BIGGEST differentiating and personalizing factor, and can easily be achieved by designing immersive learning experience that afford students the ability to complete them anytime anywhere.
Planning is Key to a Personalized Learning Rollout

In the West Shore School districts, personalized learning should have flexible learning & teaching environments, be individualized, be student-centered, use 21st Century skills, and include relationship building.

What changes in student engagement or student learning have you seen since using personalized approaches to learning?

Students have begun to look at learning through the eye of “what do I want to get out of this personally?”

What advice would you give to someone who’s just starting out with PL or what resource, activity, or tool would you recommend for someone who wants to try personalizing learning?

Find a team of people willing to try things out. Have them experiment, then bring in team members who are your biggest challenge, but who are willing to express their concerns concisely. Work with those folks to refine your process.
Category: Tailoring content based on student need

Providing Opportunities for Deeper Dives

It all started as I kept finding more and more great resources, extensions, and references to the works we studied in 12 grade English. With so many things to potentially share with students, there wasn’t enough time to use it all in a class period. Perhaps it was a parody of a scene from Hamlet or an article that might be too specific or in depth for all students in the class but I could have those resources available for those who wanted to dive deeper with whatever subject we were studying. As the resources grew on Schoology for each unit or topic, I built structures into my course where students were expected to do some of the “deep dives” beyond the standard in-class work and present their findings to the class. This pairing of personalized learning and short presentations targeted a variety of skills essential for the final project and presentation at the end of the year.

What changes in student engagement or student learning have you seen since using personalized approaches to learning?

My interest in using an LMS like Schoology began from noticing a change in students. When you live in a world where most knowledge is available instantly through a Google search, much direct instruction and content-based teaching becomes irrelevant (at least in their eyes). To reflect the world my students (and we) live in, creating personalized learning approaches in Schoology helps break out of the old models of education and, instead, instruct students in the 21st Century.

What advice would you give to someone who’s just starting out with PL or what resource, activity, or tool would you recommend for someone who wants to try personalizing learning?

Start small - provide a few choices or paths of learning for one lesson. After, reflect on what worked well and, more importantly, what enhanced the learning. Try again with another lesson with some refinements and then eventually build something bigger for a future unit once you are comfortable with the format and process.
Category: Tailoring content based on student need

Personalized Learning for the Success of All Learners

We personalize our learning for students by conducting formative assessments that are norm referenced and criterion referenced at the beginning of the school year. Based on this initial data, we gather information from different classes and structure intervention courses to meet the needs of those students within their traditional classrooms as well as providing additional support as needed.

What changes in student engagement or student learning have you seen since using personalized approaches to learning?

We have found that most students feel more empowered based on this approach because it leverages the data on student performance to provide an organized and targeted approach to intervention.

What advice would you give to someone who’s just starting out with PL or what resource, activity, or tool would you recommend for someone who wants to try personalizing learning?

Start small - focus on three or four criteria and on the students for whom you will experience the greatest gain.
Me Time

I make my courses available 24/7. My assignments are rarely due at the end of the hour. Instead, I like to have them due at midnight the day before they will be necessary to have done for class. This gives students the flexibility to work when it is most advantageous for them. Some students like to work in noise, others in quiet, etc.

What changes in student engagement or student learning have you seen since using personalized approaches to learning?

Once students realized they had choice with when and where they did their work, more engagement was available during class. It released the stress of not having enough time or having the right environment available to them to complete their work.

What advice would you give to someone who's just starting out with PL or what resource, activity, or tool would you recommend for someone who wants to try personalizing learning?

Start slow and small. Open up one aspect of learning until you and your students become comfortable with it. Set yourself and your students up for success.
Giving Up Control
(at least to a degree)

I allow students the opportunity to select from a small handful of projects to demonstrate mastery of the same skills needed to be successful in my classroom. And, sometimes I let them completely select how they will demonstrate mastery. This creates an environment where they enjoy the lessons more and results in more buy-in to both the content of the lessons as well as the relevance to their lives and the changing society around them. On occasion, I have also used mastery for differentiation. If a student demonstrates understanding of tools and techniques used to create the digital artwork I assign, there is no reason to hold them back in developing further beyond the expectations of the curriculum and the state. This empowers them to take control of their education and understand that the ultimate responsibility for succeeding in class, as well as in life in general, rests on their shoulders more than anyone else in the classroom. Over the years, while students have often complained in the moment, they always seem to come back and thank me in the long run.

What changes in student engagement or student learning have you seen since using personalized approaches to learning?

As I stated above, the biggest change is an appreciation for the process of learning as well as better understanding where the responsibility for success lands. I have also witnessed a change in interest and attitude among students who find they can make real world connections between their education and what they hope to do after graduating from high school. These connections allow the students to put forth more effort in their success and research the careers and related skills needed to land a job based on earlier knowledge gained in my classroom. This results from the increase in interest and understanding of the relevance it holds for their future. Rather than being given a series of worksheets that demonstrate individual skills, they see the interconnectedness of their knowledge and where it will take them after graduating from high school and possibly college. I have also seen this knowledge encourage students to turn their lives around from a path that might have made their lives more difficult in the long run. So, they are much better off for it.

What advice would you give to someone who’s just starting out with PL or what resource, activity, or tool would you recommend for someone who wants to try personalizing learning?

Expect there to be problems and unexpected things will pop up, but the kids will be better off for staying the course.
Student Choice/Student Voice

Using Schoology I am able to offer students choices within each assignment. I can’t do this for every assignment but for the majority I can. For example, if we are learning vocabulary I might give them the opportunity to do a crossword puzzle, create a Quizlet, write definitions, or create drawings to represent the vocab words. They also have the opportunity to decide how they want to complete some of these assignments. For example if they want to create drawings they can hand draw or they can use drawing tools.

What changes in student engagement or student learning have you seen since using personalized approaches to learning?

Because of utilizing a LMS, it is easier for me to track student progress so I am able to communicate more effectively. In addition because of the student voice/choice options students will usually find something that interests them or a technique they want to try and are more than likely to actually submit assignments instead of blowing them off because they aren’t interested or do like the way it has to be done. My failure rate has decreased and student completion has increased.

What advice would you give to someone who’s just starting out with PL or what resource, activity, or tool would you recommend for someone who wants to try personalizing learning?

Don’t think you have to change everything all at once. Take one unit and make changes this year. See what works and what didn’t. Adapt and modify. Next year you will be more productive when converting the next unit.
Category: Tailoring content based on student need

Personalizing - Giving Students What They Need

We use data to drive instruction. Then, the bulk of instruction is delivered in a small group setting so that the students are getting what they need. We do very little whole group instruction. When we work in a small group setting, we can clearly see where students have gaps in their learning, or we can see students who have a solid understanding of an objective so that we can extend their learning.

What changes in student engagement or student learning have you seen since using personalized approaches to learning?

Students are definitely more engaged and willing to push forward when they are getting what they need. Entering a classroom using personalized learning to drive instruction looks very different. Students might all be working on different projects, using different tools, and working on different topics. Using personalized learning eliminates idle time for students because they always have something to work on – whether it be remediation or an extension of an objective.

What advice would you give to someone who's just starting out with PL or what resource, activity, or tool would you recommend for someone who wants to try personalizing learning?

I would suggest to start small. Try with just one unit or lesson. Get comfortable with how it will work and what it will look like in your classroom, and then you can continue to expand. Take time to think the entire lesson/unit through. What will you do for students who need more support? How will you extend the learning for students who grasp the objective. What pre-assessment will help guide you to begin? How will the students demonstrate their learning? Can you offer project choices? Not everything has to be technology based. Think about the way your students learn. You will be amazed at how much your students learn!
Student-Paced Based On Mastery Of Content

For certain units where students come with prerequisite information, there is a mastery based approach utilizing Schoology completion rules. This same thing works for projects to provide check in points. This allows students to gain feedback particular to them when they need it.

What changes in student engagement or student learning have you seen since using personalized approaches to learning?

Students understand the content better by the time of the assessment. Student learning is slower, though when it is self-paced. Students got annoyed at first, but by the time of the test, they were much more confident. Their engagement in the lesson varied based on how tired they are.

What advice would you give to someone who’s just starting out with PL or what resource, activity, or tool would you recommend for someone who wants to try personalizing learning?

I would suggest to just go for it but start small with a 2 day lesson. Use the completion rules in Schoology. Break the tasks up into small tasks.
Category: Tailoring content based on student need

Start Small To Make Big Progress!

I am always doing formative assessments to see where my students are in their learning. This information drives the instruction to meet the needs of my students. I have become accustomed to understanding that it’s okay for not everyone to be working on the exact same skill at the exact same time.

What changes in student engagement or student learning have you seen since using personalized approaches to learning?

It’s a delicate balance. We still place high value on collaboration and learning within a community. Personalized learning used to mean learning by yourself, now it just means learning that’s right for you, within the larger group.

What advice would you give to someone who’s just starting out with PL or what resource, activity, or tool would you recommend for someone who wants to try personalizing learning?

Start small. Maybe just start with one unit or even a lesson just to get a feel for your changing role in the classroom. If you change too much at once, your confusion will filter to your class.
Group Projects in Large Classes

I have my students do group projects in my survey history courses. In some of those courses, I set the due dates by the students’ choice of topic with where it fits in the course syllabus. This allows for multiple due dates, spreading out my grading load. If multiple projects are due on the same day, I can create groups in Schoology to allow for each student to see where their project should be submitted.

What changes in student engagement or student learning have you seen since using personalized approaches to learning?

With coordinating the group assignments with the Schoology calendar, students don’t panic when another group submits their project - wondering if they missed their due date.

What advice would you give to someone who's just starting out with PL or what resource, activity, or tool would you recommend for someone who wants to try personalizing learning?

Have your grading rubric in place first. Then create as many groups as you need.
Conclusion

Thanks to the insights of educators from around our community, it’s clear that there are many ways to personalize learning in the classroom, all of which can prove to be successful.

With so many strategies, platforms and methods of integrating personalized learning into your class routine, there’s sure to be something for everyone. Take an idea or two from this eBook and try them in your classroom, then let us know how it turns out on Twitter @Schoology.

Learn more about how you can personalize learning using Schoology’s LMS here