

Personalized Learning Practices to Engage Students and Increase Performance

INTRODUCTION

Quality instruction, as it is defined today, involves enabling students to realize their potential by meeting them on their terms. Instructors require an enhanced awareness of student performance to differentiate instruction in support of more personalized learning practices. Educators can face an enormous challenge in trying to accommodate individual differences throughout their classrooms.

Student needs vary more dramatically than ever before. The pressure to perform is increasing at an astounding rate. Educators may share that concern, struggling to meet their students' needs due to increased class sizes, closing achievement gaps, and deep cuts to services and programs (Santos, 2012). Teacher evaluations are also changing, placing added weight on achievement data.

The demands on educators are increasing despite the scarcity of budgets and resources available to them. More than ever, today's teachers must harness innovative technical advantages to sustain student engagement and develop personalized learning journeys that will help students reach their unique—and full—potential.

BALANCING TIME AND QUALITY IN INSTRUCTION

As teachers review assessment data, they are able to develop individualized instruction that is best for each student. Differentiating instruction helps teachers meet learners' unique needs. Students should, ideally be presented with multiple options and view learning as enjoyable, challenging, and engaging. A capable instructor values both data and differentiation when accommodating individual learning styles.

Implementation itself can be the challenge. Educators often express the lack of time as a major limiting factor in their ability to plan and carry out differentiation in the classroom (Cash & Heacox, 2011). Resources supporting customized learning solutions may also be limited. Sustaining student engagement by providing personalized learning choices and differentiated education is the key objective, but practical execution can prove difficult.

Modern education must adapt new technologies to deal with these challenges. Redefined strategies have emerged, including a focus on new evaluation systems, data-driven instruction, and differentiated learning in the classroom. Today's instructors are poised to enter a period of innovative and productive transition.

HOW DOES THE BRIGHTSPACE PLATFORM SUPPORT AN INNOVATIVE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE?

Sustaining student engagement and increasing learning opportunities immediately become more attainable priorities through the effective use of technology. An online learning environment offers resources that can transform a classroom experience. Because the methods of instructional delivery are not limited to a school's hours or physical building, students have multiple options to define when, where, and how they learn. Flexible access for students injects additional freedom and personalization into the educational experience, which fosters increased learner engagement.

Technology enables teachers to meet the growing demands placed on them by helping them manage time and resources more effectively. This advantage, by extension, empowers instructors with the flexibility needed to meet the unique needs of their students. They can create customized learning paths which identify specific areas for remediation or enrichment opportunities. Increased data availability—accessible in a variety of formats, anytime—allows teachers to support their students in meaningful, efficient ways while providing the upward accountability demanded of them.

The Brightspace platform helps instructors and students achieve their learning goals.

DIFFERENTIATION WITH TECHNOLOGY

Personalized learning opportunities add value to any classroom. Integrating technology is the first and most important step in helping teachers differentiate instruction for students based on their individual needs (Decker, 2003). Differentiated instruction aims to meet those needs through effective teaching practices that target groups of students based on interests and preferred ways of learning. Students may have common learning goals, but the learning process must be flexible and purposeful (Cash & Heacox, 2011).

Specialized grouping based on learner needs creates a student-centered environment that challenges learners while incorporating their interests. A reliable platform must support active learning and provide the resources necessary to support it. The Brightspace platform is inherently flexible and equipped for optimizing academic learning time. For example, teachers can use the Sections, Groups, Release Conditions, Special Access, or Intelligent Agents tools to diversify the learning experience. They can also maximize performance by managing student data more efficiently.

Defined sections—which only allow students to see learning materials relevant to their group—allow instructors to manage entire classes with ease. Collaboration with other students is specific to their assigned section, allowing for focused interaction. Instructors can share materials and common items without duplicating efforts. Special Education teachers, academic coaches, and teacher assistants can be assigned to specific sections so access is targeted for select students. Teachers have flexibility and control over how they share information, distribute work, and manage their classroom.

The Groups tool, for example, helps instructors address the specific needs of—appropriately—student groups. They can foster collaboration on group—specific subject matter or enroll them in areas for enrichment and/or remediation. Teachers also have the flexibility to move students in or out of groups or designations with ease.

Release Conditions and Special Access tools help ensure mastery and support individual needs in various ways. Instructors can use Release Conditions to regulate when a student moves on to the next lesson or activity. The ability to differentiate material is also key: course content specific to remediation or enrichment can be configured as only available to students who meet certain conditions. Instructors can provide customized learning options for their students based on real-time learning feedback.

Teachers know firsthand that every learner is different. A student may require additional time as part of an accommodation in his Individualized Education Plan (IEP). A family emergency could occur which necessitates the extension of a report deadline.

Such issues can be dealt with easily, and privately, through special access properties which allow teachers to assign unique time frames to a specific individual or group of students. Other students are not aware of the conditions specified. Late submissions or deadline extensions are handled the same way. The flexibility further empowers teachers to tailor the course to fit their students' unique needs.

The Intelligent Agents tool is a powerful feature that support teachers by identifying and tracking at-risk students. Instructors receive notifications and recommended actions to encourage student success. The agents help monitor established Release Conditions, taking a proactive approach to student performance. If a student is not performing satisfactorily, the instructor receives an email alert or text to their mobile device. Additionally, agents can notify the individual learner of supplementary resources and clarify next steps in the learning journey—like a personal coach helping to keep students on the right track.



Standalone products in the Brightspace platform further support instructors by providing flexibility as they attempt to differentiate and personalize the learning experience. One such example is D2L ePortfolio. Major benefits of having a digital portfolio—as opposed to using a paper counterpart—include the ability to share content with others, extend learning, and demonstrate individual pieces' importance.

Digital portfolios are a useful tool for assessing students because they include samples of work that offer a richer and more authentic portrait of a student's abilities. Students have an opportunity for self-reflection, which—in many cases—is the best way for them to learn. These collections communicate a student's performance to others in powerful ways. They supplement instruction by providing more detailed and useful feedback about the student's achievements while also highlighting where the learner needs more help.

D2L ePortfolio helps showcase growth over time, enabling students to take ownership as active participants in their learning. Students, advisors, and faculty have a place to collaborate and build meaningful relationships. Instructors can incorporate reflective learning experiences allowing students to take ownership of their progress. Learners are able to personally highlight and reflect on what they have learned, how they learned it, and how they have subsequently applied the knowledge.

As a student progresses through his or her academic career, they are able to consider how their perceptions have evolved over time. D2L ePortfolio is not limited to the classroom: students can use the same collection as a career portfolio when they leave school to enter the workforce. These experiences, whether academic or professional, can be shared publicly or privately depending on the user's preference. D2L ePortfolio helps capture a lifelong learning journey, from Kindergarten to career.

DATA-DRIVEN INSTRUCTION

Meaningful data drives better instructional decisions. Tying student achievement data to teacher evaluations is becoming a commonplace practice for many institutions. Being able to access and use data in the classroom itself is no longer an option, but a necessity.

According to ASCD, a school's culture can benefit unilaterally from the use of student learning data, and improving the quality of instruction is nearly impossible without it (Fenton & Murphy, 2011). The Brightspace platform offers flexible, multi-source data reporting features to help understand what students have mastered. Examples supporting data-driven instruction may include:

- Formative classroom assessment data for determining how effective a lesson is.
- Benchmark test data for measuring mastery on units of study, or a set of learning objectives, as part of accountability.
- Rubrics that provide teachers with standardized evaluation methods and give students the opportunity to assess their own work prior to submission.

Data is available based on multiple assessment types, including diagnostic, formative, and summative. Diagnostic and formative assessment data allows a teacher to measure a student's understanding and differentiate instruction in precise ways. Summative assessment data helps students prepare for state assessments and track schools' accountability.

The Brightspace platform supports holistic and analytic rubrics for the evaluation of learner performance on activities linked to specific competencies and learning objectives. Rubrics are available through a variety of course tools, including Quizzes, Dropbox assignments, Grades, ePortfolio items, and Discussions.

Instructors can subsequently tie learning objectives to these various items to assess what students do not know before moving forward. State standards can be imported and used to align competencies and objectives within a course. This allows assessments, assignments and activities to be tailored to the curriculum, further supporting the collection of student performance data. This information can be accessed through Quiz and User Progress Reports, and—more powerfully—analytics tools.

The Brightspace Advanced Analytics solution provides reporting at both institutional and user levels. Activity reports and academic achievement charts, for example, support the administrative team while specific learning deficiency reports assist classroom decision making. Advanced Analytics helps users identify specific student needs and interests. The solution presents data in meaningful ways that help efficiently meet academic challenges. Instead of waiting for standardized test results to gauge the direction of your classroom or school, Advanced Analytics provides the data immediately.

TURNING THOUGHTS INTO ACTIONS Adopting innovative technologies and solutions has driven the creation of personalized educational experiences for many institutions, as highlighted in the following snapshots.

Florida's Daytona State College uses the Brightspace Advanced Analytics solution to track course, program, and institutional learning objectives. The data supports continuous improvement goals and helps assess learning material effectiveness. The tools contained within Brightspace platform are helping Daytona State College definitively promote student engagement and retention.

Wilson County's Tennessee Virtual Online School (TVOLS) uses the Release Conditions tool to generate individualized learning paths and differentiated instruction. Students work through a personalized learning journey based on their prior knowledge and pre-test evaluations. After students complete a pre-test in a content area, learning objects tied to standards and competencies are generated.

Alabama ACCESS uses the Release Conditions tool for credit recovery. Students work through additional content when pre-test scores fail to meet required standards. Student who score below the mastery level set receive content related to remediation and practice. Conversely, students who establish mastery of learning objectives move forward on a different path specific to their individual needs.

SUMMARY

D2L has created a sophisticated learning platform that empowers instructors and institutions to differentiate the educational experience. D2L ePortfolio provides students with a unique collection of achievements and opportunities for reflection. Advanced Analytics equips users with the tools needed to deliver data-driven instruction. D2L Capture™ brings the inverted classroom experience to life.

Collectively, these solutions foster collaboration and support creative, varying, personalized educational experiences for all students. Technology has transformed learning in a fundamental way. Maximizing student and teacher performance is the ultimate goal—and benefit—in the development of an innovative classroom experience that best reflects the unique needs of today's learners.

RESOURCES

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About D2L

A global leader in EdTech, D2L is the creator of Brightspace, the world's first integrated learning platform. The company partners with thought-leading organizations to improve learning through data-driven technology that helps deliver a personalized experience to every learner, regardless of geography or ability. D2L's open and extensible platform is used by more than 1,100 clients and almost 15 million individual learners in higher education, K-12, healthcare, government, and the enterprise sector—including Fortune 1000 companies. The company has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore. www.brightspace.com | www.D2L.com

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