

BOOK REVIEW

MAKE LEARNING PERSONAL: THE WHAT, WHO, WOW, WHERE, AND WHY

Authors

Bray, B., & McClaskey, K.

(Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2015, 251 pp., index. ISBN: 978-1-4833-5297-8)

This book is indeed insightful and a challenge to many people who might be complacent in their *usual* ways of managing teaching and learning. Old habits die hard. For sure, it sounds personal as the title suggests. It resonates with everyone—you and I; it draws us closer to the heart of the matter, that is, managing *how we teach*, managing *learning*, and that matters greatly if we consider the *learners'* perspectives. Barbara Bray and Kathleen McClaskey argue that we should change our “perceptions about learning and realize [that] every child is a learner” (p. xxiii). The idea is, if you are a learner, you ought to be thinking seriously about learning as something you are responsible for, *making it your own*, if you will. If you are a teacher, you ought to be shifting your paradigm by now; make teaching less centered on you but more on the actual person who is receiving what you teach, the learner. Know your learner, understand what they want and what they think would work for them. The point to drive home is *learner-centeredness* tends to be the buzz word for the twenty-first century classroom.

Taken further, classroom management has to do with coordinating things, materials, and others, as all these need to make sense. In making learning personal, a teacher and a learner have to know how to coordinate what they want to teach, to be taught, and to learn. How do teachers and learners do this? Following the footsteps of the management guru, Peter Drucker (1954) innovation has to be at the core if changes are to happen. For innovation to take place in one's self or environment/school, Everett Rogers

(2003) reminds us that the new idea or product or behavior will have to be adopted through communication about such an idea. Diffusion of innovation occurs. This book is a clear pathway to making the idea of *personalized learning*, a reality. The focus of the book is that “personalizing learning always starts with the learner!” (p. xxiii), Bray and McClaskey insist that we “make learning personal so learners take responsibility for their learning” (p. 1).

The book begins with a foreword by John H. Clarke, a Brown University researcher and former teacher who has focused on personalizing learning at the high school level. His comment reinforces the idea of personalizing learning and promotes the book to a level where to transform, one needs to be convinced and know what it takes to do so. As Clarke remarks, “[a]t his heart, *Make Learning Personal* offers educators a way to work with learners that accentuates professionalism in education” (p. xxi). Clarke has written several books on personalized learning including *Personalized Learning: An Introduction* (2003).

This book is both a reference and a handbook for those who want to make a difference in their teaching (and how learning is to take place for learners). It gives a detailed summary of the definitions of personalization, differentiation and provides an individualization chart for easier reference. Even though the book is not designed for learners (students), it is very carefully crafted for all who deal with learners (and are themselves learners) to take note of how they can transform

their teaching, and ways of viewing the lesson in making learners take responsibility for their own learning by knowing what others are doing. After all, we are all learners (p. 69) if we are prepared to learn how to make things better. In their *Preface*, Bray and McClaskey state, “learning is personal”. The *how* to personalize learning, however, is not provided by the authors (p. xxv) as evident in the title but the examples are eye-openers for many. This book is a must-read for school administrators, educators, parents, and teachers, and those who want to learn.

Organized into six chapters, the authors expose the readers to *What is Personalized Learning* in Chapter One which they admit is a controversial term given that it means different things to different people. Basing their definitions on the 2010 National Education Technology Plan of the United States Department of Education, Bray and McClaskey later fine-tune the terms to highlight the core business which is, personalizing learning, to focus on the learner. Among others, the learners drive their own learning and take responsibility for their learning (p. 13), are co-designers of the curriculum and the learning environment (p. 34). The central themes include the proposition that the learner’s voice and choice cannot be taken for granted; *these must be heard and made known*. Interestingly, to moot these ideas, readers are exposed to various examples of what is personalized learning and what is not. The authors discuss several known terms and projects including Adaptive Learning Systems, Blended Learning, Differentiated Instruction, The Flipped Classroom, 1:1 Programs, Project-Based Learning, and Individual Education Plans. The point from all these leads to one thing: the learner has a voice and choice in how the activities are designed and implemented, the approach can be regarded as personalized learning. It means serious transformation on both the teacher and learners; they have to co-construct the activities if the ultimate goal is for learners to learn.

After the *What* details, the subsequent chapters follow with the *Who* (Chapter Two), *WOW* (Chapter Three), *Where* (Chapter Four), and *Why* (Chapter Five) factors. All chapters have

the *Pause/Think/Reflect* window at the side of the page after each detail. The chapters make references to several theorists and works related to the details given and end with review questions. These facilitate readers in getting acquainted with and reflecting on the ideas of the scholars and connecting the dots, so to speak. Chapter Two poses a question: Who are your learners? The heading creates a self-reflection, particularly on the part of the teachers/educators/curriculum designers as to whether we really know our learners. The chapter discusses several key learning theorists including Plato, Vygotsky, Dewey, Bruner, Csikszentmihalyi, Dweck and explore the ideas with the reasons for personalizing learning for Generation Y, Generation Z or the Net Generation. In doing so, Bray and McClaskey reflect on and provide a critique of the learning styles, multiple intelligences, lexile scores and standardized tests which they claim “tend to cause a fixed mindset for teachers that are difficult to break” (p. 46). The learning styles, Bray and McClaskey argue, “ensure that the theory continues to survive despite the evidence against it” (p. 46), drawing their evidence from Scott’s work (2010). Citing the works of Dekker, Howard-Jones and Jolles (2012), the authors assert that due to our highly interconnected brains, we cannot, therefore, be only “identified as having only one or two learning styles” (p. 47). Similarly, the multiple intelligences are found to have two issues. The first issue, drawn from a critical review of the topic by Lynn Waterhouse (2012), is that no published studies support the validity of the theory. The second issue concerns “too many of the categories correlate too highly with one another to be separate intelligences” (p. 48). The authors, however, have not informed the readers how to handle these theories differently when we deal with learners.

By asking the readers to consider if Plato personalized learning 2,400 years ago, the authors call for an awareness of what that would mean for us today. They have skillfully made us ponder on the fact that personalized learning is *not* something new. The challenge is to implement it, which might mean, a major overhaul for some and a small adjustment for

others. No doubt many will be confused with what it means by making learning personal.

The *Who* chapter informs us about learners (not students as the authors emphasized) and “how they learn best” (p. xxv). The focus is on the learner, with more ideas being mooted as in creating a personal learner profile. Learners will create the profiles with the teachers’ guidance. Even though many of us might have already been exposed to some kind of learner profiles, this personal profile considers what learners include in accessing information (Access), Engaging the content taught (Engage), and in expressing what they know and understand (Express). Learners do this by considering both the strengths and challenges encountered. In this chapter, the authors insist on why students should be referred to as “learners”, and thus, provide the characteristics of learners (p. 70). These include, developing own learning goals, and finding ways to collaborate with others—not just for a grade, and never stop learning. It makes us wonder upon reading this, whether we are surrounded with students or learners in the classroom!

Chapter Three is about the WOW moment, which relates to how the teacher and learner roles are changing by going through the stages of personalized learning environments. The wow effect connotes the “a-ha” element, having understood the learners and their profiles. It creates a rather big moment when teacher and learner have to adjust to “new roles” which they construct together.

Chapter Four describes readers with where personalized learning is happening in the world. Bray and McClaskey provide details of the education system in Finland, Canada, Italy, Sweden, and more so of the United States. Readers get to read about people’s efforts to transform the traditional classroom into something that makes learning personal. I find the list of characteristics and several models presented helpful indeed. These include Big Picture Learning (learning through internships), Walker Learning Approach (multi-age classrooms/play-based learning), Montessori

(personal learning paths), and Inquiry Hub (technology solution).

Chapter Five provides the reasons for personalizing learning in the authors’ attempt to diffuse the idea about personalizing learning as they acknowledge possible “resistance from teachers, parents and even learners” (p. 163). Learners might be concerned about grades. The final chapter (Chapter Six) challenges readers to personalize learning with a neat list of how that can be done (p. 217) followed by the top trends for personalizing learning.

The book consists of not only recent references but also a rather comprehensive glossary of key terms. Words such as “autonomy” (p. 226) “self-governance” and “self-regulation” tend to equate more with the learners if we consider autonomous learning and self-led action. On this take, to echo Kadir Din (2010): “to empower students to play a more active role, we have to train them in the fundamentals of leadership” (p. 11). We have to begin training students to be leaders of their own learning.

This book would have been better if Bray and McClaskey had included learners’ verbatim responses or feedback on what the learners have gone through based on the world tour the authors presented. In so doing, learners can better inform us about how they engage in such learning and about self-empowerment.

References

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