

## Interactive Classroom Working Group: Personalising Learning

### Spotlight on Promoting creativity through personal learning

By Alicia Bankhofer, English teacher and eLearning Coordinator, RGORG Anton-Krieger-Gasse (Vienna, Austria)

#### *Background*

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Since its beginnings in 1974/1975, my school has been known for two important principles: encouraging innovation in teaching and welcoming students of all academic backgrounds and social strata. This is the concept of “Gesamtschule”, which literally means “a school for all”, which goes against the national tradition of separating students from age 10 into two strains – the academic (for the more successful students) and the vocational (for the less successful students) one. Educators at my school teach in teams at lower secondary level and use various methods to promote social and competency-based learning – project-based learning, open learning formats and learning with a buddy system, to name a few. Our student population is mixed. Many stem first or second generation immigrant families and some have physical or mental disabilities. We strive to reach each student, respecting diverse circumstances, capabilities and competencies. As such, an individualized approach to learning and teaching fits well with our school day-to-day.

#### *Benefits of personalising learning for students and schools/teachers*

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Rather than “teach to the middle” or “teach the textbook”, my fellow teachers and I have seen firsthand what is possible when we have time for deeper conversations with students and offer them personal learning experiences that will help them grow. There is less room than in other schools, that students “fall through the cracks” so to speak. Our regular team meetings focus on our students’ development, where we aim to address potential difficulties swiftly and adopt measures to counteract negative trends. The key is getting to know each student and knowing what is going on with them. Forming a healthy teacher-student relationship is the key to success.

One of my students was encouraged to read the Diary of Anne Frank, after receiving her personal assignment to write a short text about her in English. She had always believed that she was a poor English student, and did not expect to receive higher than a pass in the subject. Six months later, and after insisting

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that her parents take her to Amsterdam to visit the Anne Frank house, she has not only improved her passing grade in her last test, but more importantly has gained self-confidence. .

- *My students get more individual attention, which helps me to focus on what they need rather on what I need.*
- *Personalising learning supports our vision of educating each student on a personal level and believing in his/her personal success.*

## **Showcasing: Promoting creativity through personal learning**

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I focus on giving personalised assignments that are designed to make students think out of the box and thus be creative in working out the result. I try to respect their preferences where possible, accepting their suggestions and not insisting that my way is the only right way. I focus on the learning outcome. I want them to be personally engaged with the topic in particular and with English in general. Therefore, I give them challenges and allow “wiggle room” when it comes to the form of the output. I feel confident that this approach brings the most benefit for my students and will continue to work on ways to make more time with them on a personal level in the classroom.

- *I aim to share my experiences and learn from others so as to improve my own teaching practice. I strongly believe in the concept of continuous improvement and professional growth, especially educators in the 21st century and consider innovation to be paramount.*

My showcase demonstrates how to use flipped learning in maths and how to track each student when every student is doing a different activity/homework. The tracking system incorporates rewards, sanctions and students having to take ownership for their own learning and demonstrate their weekly progress.

### ***How is theme demonstrated (in and out of school), and in which subjects/classes?***

Promoting creativity through personal learning journeys is currently being explored in Maths, English, the Creative Arts and Music at lower and at upper secondary level.

### ***Most popular technology used in support of theme***

Using 1:1 iPads in class, coupled with the game-based and challenge-based learning methods, has allowed me to spark the interest and to increase the motivation of my students for learning English. Our standard setup allows us to demonstrate students’ work on the projector via Apple TV, and use the internet together with our mobile devices to learn. Students have gained not only in linguistic competence but also in media competence.

What is now possible, is that I can not only support the weaker learners, but I can also engage the smartest of the class, often in the same session. Each work on the class activity and perform according to their capability, without feeling overwhelmed or bored. I am able to make suggestions, give hints and scaffold where necessary, and support others by coaching them on HOW to achieve their goals. It is not about me; it is about them.

### *What happens in a typical 1:1 teaching situation or class when personalising learning?*

During the session there is a short input phase where I explain how we will work and what the assignment is. I post the assignment in Google Classroom or on our class blog and the students log on using their iPads and get to work. The assignment can be working on a presentation about a superhero/supervillain or researching bad/good job interviews. They generally work in pairs or groups, fostering collaborative learning. After the active learning session, they post or present or submit their findings and we reflect together on whether the learning goal have been met.

The following is an excerpt of an interview with four students:

#### **How many countries and languages in the classroom?**

My students have roots in Turkey, Croatia, Kurdistan, Macedonia, Egypt, Czech Republic, Chechenia, Austria, Bulgaria, Bosnia.

#### **How is teaching different?**

In English class last year they wrote a lot. Now they feel they can feel free to bring in their own thoughts, they feel more comfortable trying and testing things out, without being afraid of making mistakes. They enjoy the lessons more and are more motivated to learn. On Fridays they think: we have (to endure) 2 hours of Math and then we can (final) have English. They look forward to these lessons where they can interact and be creative.

#### **Do you feel that being more active in class is more work (negative)?**

No it is more pleasant. They feel that sitting there being passive is more tiring. Being active in this classroom means that it is clearer to them what they can do and what they can't do. They can check the progress better.

#### **What do you think about flipped classroom?**

They love the flipped classroom method, saying that the best thing about it is that you can rewind and look at it again or whenever and where ever they want. In the classroom they cannot rewind me. They find the videos practical and helpful, also when they are integrated in learning plans in preparation for the test. Sometimes they look at the videos when they have nothing better to do; they share the videos with their friends. They look at the videos at home on the computer or on their smartphones.

#### **What other comments do you have about our way or working? Is there anything you miss or you would change?**

Sometimes they actually miss writing (something they never would have thought to be true). Sometimes they are disorganized and forget to check classroom for homework. But they love the app, it's easy to see which assignments are due and the instructions are clear.

#### **What would they recommend to teachers?**

They feel more willing to learn and the lessons are more interesting. They enjoy the many ways they have been learning e.g. QR codes or with the tablets. With them they are no longer so dependent on the teachers for their learning.

As for teachers, some say they do not feel comfortable “losing control” of the classroom. Also, it takes more planning time and personalizing learning “takes away time from other important things.” Others find the tools and possibilities appealing to both themselves and to the students, fostering improvement.

Parent reactions are positive. Many have confirmed that their children are motivated for the first time to do English assignments and spend time at home on English tasks.

### *Impact*

Teachers are no longer sole holders of knowledge or “sages on the stage.” Personalising learning forces us to think of the students and their needs first. This means more preparation and more time in the classroom spent answering unexpected questions or addressing diverse needs. Technical challenges force us to be creative ourselves and flexible in our ways of working. We constantly have to innovate, test and experiment, adapting materials and tasks to each individual learning group or learners. This places an additional responsibility on each teacher willing to teach in this way. But it is the one way that brings most rewards.

## *How has personalising learning contributed to innovation and change?*

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From what I observe, it has encouraged students to take charge of their own learning journey and identify their growth areas better. Previously, many students sat passively in class and dutifully filled out worksheets. Not much thinking was involved. Everyone got the same worksheet. Now, they receive a challenge where they can choose an aspect for themselves and how it will be presented or finished. They must actively think and use their creativity to push themselves to use technology and/or tools they’ve never used before. They are more motivated in class and outside of class. Results have improved and they have developed collaborative and communicative skills.

### About the author:



- Expert: [Alicia Bankhofer](#), English teacher and eLearning Coordinator
- Class blog: <https://english4f.wordpress.com>
- Youtube channel: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNWDHbFId90XfkXSgP\\_S\\_DA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNWDHbFId90XfkXSgP_S_DA)
- Blog entry → Personalising Learning: <https://bankhoferedu.wordpress.com/2016/04/17/personalised-learning-is-all-around-us-even-at-a-star-wars-exhibition/>
- Blog entry → Challenge-based Learning: <https://bankhoferedu.wordpress.com/2016/02/01/combining-challenge-based-learning-with-genius-hour-to-create-magic-in-the-classroom/>
- iPad class Interviews: <https://youtu.be/38YmJEWifi4>

- Genius hour:
  - <http://www.geniushour.com>
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- Challenge-based Learning:
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  - [http://www.apple.com/br/education/docs/CBL\\_Classroom\\_Guide\\_Jan\\_2011.pdf](http://www.apple.com/br/education/docs/CBL_Classroom_Guide_Jan_2011.pdf)
  - <http://www.nmc.org/pdf/2011-challenge-based-learning-report-implementation-project.pdf>

A nice report on how we personalise learning in my classroom.



*Figure 1: Mergim, Valentin, Angi and Umut at Vienna's University College of Teacher Education, getting ready to show how their learning is personalised, March 2016*

On 2 March 2016, teachers, students, experts and interested educational professionals met at Vienna's University College of Teacher Education for the yearly eBazar, an event that showcases innovation in eLearning at primary and secondary school level in Austria.

This year's motto was: "May we have a bit more eLearning?" Groups of students of all ages demonstrated how they use various eLearning tools and platforms to promote learning, including Minecraft, virtual clickers, flipped classroom, Scratch, 3D-printing, Lego Robotics, Coding, Audience Response Systems and Raspberry Pi.



I was privileged to present how we use Tablets and Mobile Learning at our school to promote individualised learning and I was especially pleased to be accompanied by 4 of my students: Angi, Mergim, Umut and Valentin.



*Figure 2: Alicia with 4 students at the eBazar, Vienna's University College of Teacher Education, March 2016*

Several tables were set up for the participating groups, and using a “speed-dating” format, visitors could stop by the tables and see the demonstrations first-hand. At our table we showed the following main points:

Learning is differentiated and personalised:

- Pupils choose topics or subtopics, do their own research in books or on the internet
- Pupils choose HOW they want to investigate and explore the topic e.g. producing a video, animation or an ebook
- Pupils are driven by their personal learning tempo and can work at their own pace, according to their own competency
- Pupils are supported outside of the classroom by learning videos (flipped classroom) and by communication with the teacher using the Remind app

The 4 students showed how they did their homework using Google Classroom, or how they prepared for tests using our class blog <https://english4f.wordpress.com>. Also they demonstrated how they learn

using games on learningapps.org or using apps like Garageband and Quizlet. Lastly, we presented examples of how they worked collaboratively in the classroom using Padlet or the class blog.

Here is a short clip where they talk about how we worked this year in English:  
<https://youtu.be/38YmJEWifi4>



*Figure 3: Angi, Mergim, Valentin and Umut show their personalised iPads: Anne Frank, Mozart, Tim Berners-Lee and Tesla. eBazar, March 2016*