

Please, Take It Personally

BY LAUREN DIXON

Personalized learning may take more time and resources to create upfront, but the returns on the back end in engagement and knowledge retention make it more than worthwhile.

To invest money in learning initiatives only to have employees not remember or care about what was presented is a wasteful shame. However, personalizing learning for students can promote longer periods of engagement as well as better information recall post learning.

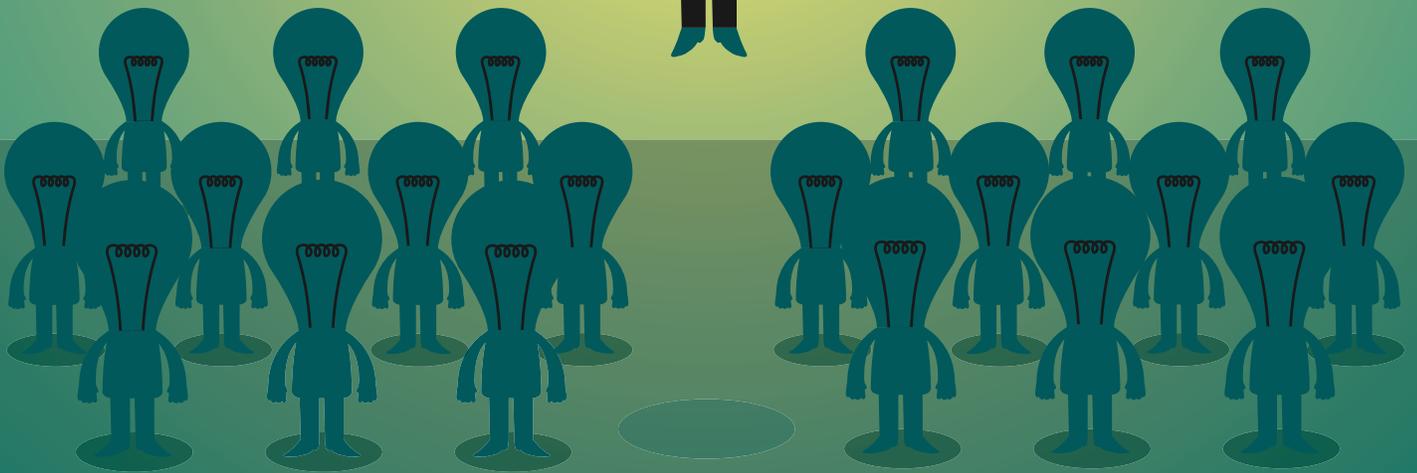
When something isn't personalized, learning leaders run the risk of it being too difficult for a student to grasp immediately, and they may lose them, said Jessica Berlinski, chief impact officer at Personalized Learning Games, a software company for grades K-8. The same thing may happen if the lesson is too easy.

"They're not going to be engaged. They're going to be bored," she said. "With any kind of personalization, you're finding the sweet spot, the optimal space of learning."

Of course, there are different definitions of personalized learning. According to the Glossary of Education Reform, personal learning refers to a variety of educational programs, instructional approaches and academic-support strategies intended to address distinct learning needs, but the glossary also states that "personalized learning has such broad implications, and the term encompasses such a wide variety of potential programs and strategies" that it could be difficult to determine exactly what the term means without specific examples.

Peggy Grant, senior content developer for Clarity Innovations Inc., an educational consultancy, said personalized learning is heavily project based, and learners can choose their topic of study.

"In a personalized learning environment, students take a lot of the responsibility for their learning, the teacher is more of a facilitator than someone who just gives them information that they need to remember," she said. "Students do more creating. They get choices about what they learn whenever possible. They have choices about how they show what they learned. ... They also work with other people."



On the other hand, Allison Rossett, professor emerita of educational technology at San Diego State University, said personalized learning is largely assessment-based, especially in the workplace. Formative assessment in particular is important. Rather than learners studying material and being tested once, they are assessed throughout a program and given real-time feedback multiple times.

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Jon Mott, chief learning officer of Learning Objects, a software company, also spoke to the value of assessments. He said learning programs should begin with some kind of diagnostic test so learning leaders can see where an employee’s knowledge begins in case curriculum changes are necessary. If learners have a certain amount of pre-existing knowledge, they could opt out of the program, freeing up more time to devote to learners who may need extra attention.

Efforts like this can help to increase employee engagement. Learning programs that are personalized to address skills employees lack also will help to connect development directly back to their job or daily tasks. “If I feel like I’m getting just the right skills, tools and knowledge to be more successful, it’s going to form kind of a virtuous cycle of training to performance,” Mott said.

At appliance manufacturer Dyson, workers do precisely that. Through Be Dyson Training Grants, employees submit to a panel proposals on what they would like to learn and why, then Dyson provides the funds of up to \$3,000 for individuals and up to \$5,000 for teams to pursue their learning goals. The panel discussion is quarterly, and the company sees between 10 and 15 proposals each session. Proposals should be

professionally tied to Dyson and represent the employee or team’s personal growth. Be Dyson allows the business to assess and meet its needs rather than have learning leaders put together formal programs on things it does not need.

For example, Dyson’s PR team wanted to react to quarterback Tom Brady’s “Deflategate” by posting an image through social media. But the team members lacked the Photoshop skills to create their image and had to go through a lengthy process with the graphics team. By the time their image was completed, it was no longer timely. Their Be Dyson proposal was for the team to take courses to learn Photoshop to help improve social media posts.

“I never would have thought, ‘Oh, you know what? Our PR people, they need some help with Photoshop,’” said Jesse Hartigan, Dyson’s U.S. national training manager. “We wouldn’t have invested that money into getting that problem solved. But when you hand down to every individual at Dyson the opportunity to take learning upon themselves ... we’ve gone as personal as you can get.”

This approach is in line with Grant’s idea of personalized learning: Learners can make development choices on what engages and interests them and how they demonstrate knowledge. She also said the most important characteristic of personalized learning is to pick a topic to work on and continue to practice it. Similarly, in the Be Dyson grants, employees take what they’ve learned and apply it directly to their work.

Dyson’s return on investment hasn’t been formally quantified, but Hartigan said the return on investment was almost instantaneous. Before, the PR team lost a lot of time waiting for paperwork and processes to finish before receiving their image from the graphics team. Now, that red tape is gone.

“What is the exact dollar value? I’m not too sure. But in terms of the business moving forward and the time that we save, the return on investment is very clear,” he said.

Personalized Personas

Alternative approaches to personalization include customization, which is a form of personalization but on a larger scale. For example, email etiquette will vary depending on the company, such as Deloitte vs. UPS Inc. vs. the FBI, so a program on the subject should be customized.

“You certainly want to take a look at the generic programs available off the shelf, but you want to do something to customize it to the particular issues that a consulting firm like Deloitte is confronting,” Rossett said.

Personalized learning, however, will be different for each person, she said, “because each has a different job and has different skills, perspectives,

email-writing challenges.”

Technology also plays an active role in personalized learning. Computer software can help assess, track and provide data to learners and instructors. Technology also helps learning be more just in time, as computer programs can update curricula changes more quickly, when and where learning is needed. “You can’t deliver instructor-led exactly when people need instructor-led,” Rossett said. “It’s never just in time.”

Technology also helps to deliver small bits of information for reference or coaching as performance support. It’s helpful for global communication as well, making it easier for learners to ask questions or speak to an expert in a certain field in another location.

“It’s the best thing that’s happened for learning and workforce performance professionals in forever,” Rossett said.

Where technology falls short is when the answer to a question is ambiguous. Jack McGrath, president and

creative director for Digitec Interactive, a learning company, said technology works extremely well for straightforward correct or incorrect answers.

“Whenever you’re getting high-level strategy and there’s no set correct answer, it becomes a lot more difficult to design those simulations or experiences,” McGrath said. “Not impossible, and I think it’s going to get even better as technology evolves, but that’s one of the big challenges we see.”

Aversion to technology could be another challenge. McGrath worked with Yum Brands Inc. for an immersive learning game, but it had to be adapted for Gen X and baby boomer players who preferred more linear and sequential learning.

Rossett, on the other hand, doesn’t follow generational patterns of technology-based personalized learning. “I’m a baby boomer, and I’m not a troglodyte,” she said.

She said if learning leaders provide options, different people will select options based on what they need and how they learn. Younger generations are often more inclined to use social media or ask questions online, but she said to “just make it one of the options.”

Technology works well to track progress and assist teachers, but ideally, personalization will always happen in person rather than through a software program.

“In a perfect world, every teacher, we would want them to be so tuned in to the nuance of learning and uptake of each student that we would want to have personalized instruction in action in a live, one-on-one environment,” Personalized Learning Games’ Berlinski said. However, because of funding or resource constraints, that’s often not realistic.

By combining in-person and computerized learning, technology allows each student to focus on their particular struggles, and the computer supports them where they need it most. The human element comes in when the teacher monitors employee learning and offers real-time feedback and support.

Rossett said personalization is contextual, developing employees as much as they need. “I don’t think it’s controversial. What it isn’t is prevalent because it’s hard.”

Investing the resources and time to build a personalized learning system makes this development approach more of a challenge than others. It’s often easier to buy a program off-the-shelf or to customize rather than create a personalized system. Therefore, it may be best for leaders to create learning that is personalized in some areas, but not all. The first topics covered should be those a company cares about most, beginning in areas of the business where leaders can see meaningful success. **CLO**

Let the Games Begin

Forcing learners to click through screen after screen of content, without any actual practice, is old hat.

What employees really want is on-the-job learning, said Jack McGrath, president and creative director of Digitec Interactive, a learning company. His company uses a flipped-learning model, an approach in which the student learns alone, then moves to a group space for an interactive experience. Learners try out a game-based activity, receive feedback and remediation through tutorials, and compete through an online community.

“If learning is presented out of context, then it’s really meaningless,” he said. “If you provide it in a model that adapts based on how well they perform, it basically provides a lot more relevance.”

For example, a game his company created for Hilton Worldwide features different lessons based on the employee’s role. A housekeeper and a front-desk worker won’t need to know the same things, so why teach everyone all of the material?

McGrath also has worked with The Walt Disney Co. to create an immersive learning game where employees learn about the company through a 3-D solar system. If the learner/gamer has mastered a certain area, the game adapts the content and suggests brushing up in other areas. Participants then compete through an online leaderboard, offering them competition and the opportunity to interact with other players while learning.

—Lauren Dixon

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