



Domenech, D., Sherman, M., & Brown, J. (2016). *Personalizing 21<sup>st</sup> century education: A framework for student success*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

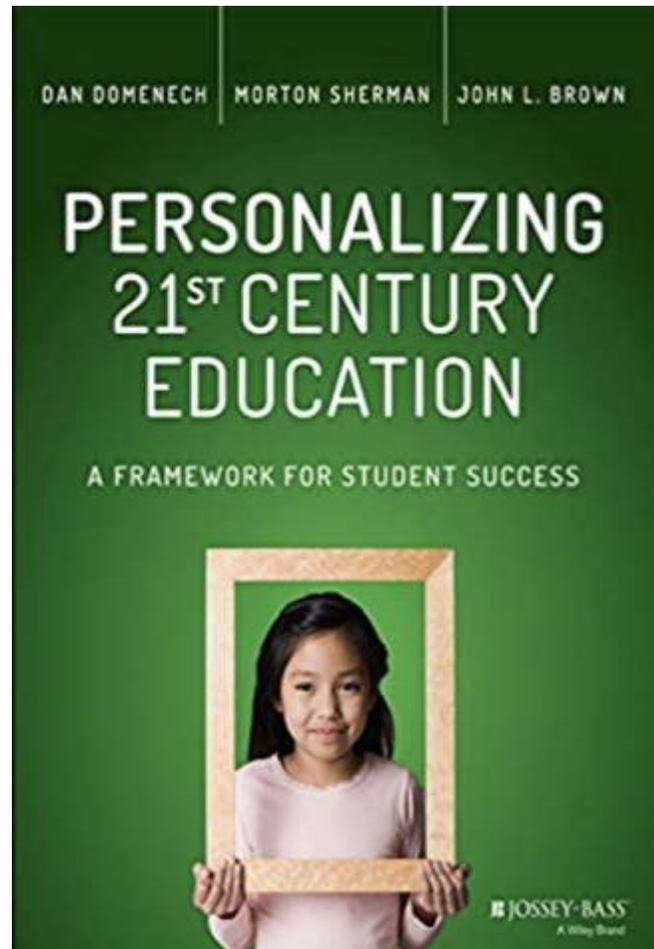
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Perhaps one of the most daunting quandaries for public school teachers across the nation is how to address the academic needs of *every* student in their classes. Individualizing education can be an overwhelming aspiration for many educators, some of whom may teach as many as 150 students each day. Digital technologies have greatly influenced the ways that people communicate, interact, and share information. Therefore, it is no surprise that more schools and school districts are giving increased attention to the uses of digital tools for promoting personalized learning experiences for the students they serve.

The American public school system has remained structurally stagnant and unchanged since the Industrial Revolution, as many education scholars, school leaders, and student advocates have previously pointed out. The factory-produced, one-size-fits-all model of standardized education is no longer addressing the needs of today's 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. The authors of *Personalizing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education* advocate for an overarching approach to educational reform that places individualized student success through personalized learning as its first priority. Domenech, Sherman, and



Brown bring more than a century of collective experience working in public education to their intellectual project for restructuring the American education system. Their revolutionary approach requires a major cultural shift in how we prepare our children for personalized learning to a culture that equally emphasizes the cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development of every student.

The first two chapters set up the authors' framework for personalizing the education system by establishing a broad vision for what personalized learning is from a systemic macro-level. Chapters 3 and 4 address the cultural paradigm shift that must take place for personalized learning to occur as schools transition from a standards-driven model to a more individualized model and the benefits of a personalized curriculum that heavily utilizes blended learning and differentiated instruction for all students. Chapters 5 and 6 are a discussion of how the influences of personalization (e.g., implementing differentiation, effective technology use, and tiered performance-based assessment) can affect instructional practices and promote high-quality student-centered experiences and results. Chapters 7 and 8 are focused on technology use and its potential for personalizing the learning experiences of every student and how all stakeholders will need to adapt to systemic organizational change to maximize cooperative alignment with the goals for personalization throughout the school or district.

The format of chapters promotes focused reflection as each begins and ends with essential questions that direct the reader's attention to topics discussed in the chapter, as well as follow up with ongoing discussion. To better clarify their proposed concepts of personalization, the authors offer several brief case studies and personal narratives that illustrate models for personalized learning in their institutions. I appreciated the epilogue in

which the authors answer 10 anticipated questions that readers may have concerning personalized learning, many of which were discussed previously in the text. Furthermore, the authors provide online resources for educators seeking to discuss or implement some of the text's concepts in various settings, including administrative committees, teacher leadership meetings, or graduate programs.

Two main points resonate throughout the text: the need to distance ourselves from scholastic standardization, and the assertion that technology integration can assist us to achieve a personalized learning school system. The authors are vehemently opposed to the traditional standardized testing that tries to homogenize and pigeonhole diverse student populations. They emphatically make clear the need to move away from the current standardized, one-size-fits-all system of assessment, making it imperative to implement alternative ways of "determining school and student achievement" (p. 96). Although completely opposed to standardization, the authors do recognize that educational standards are here to stay, and therefore, offer helpful options for personalization of assessment that keep the standards in mind.

Although personalized learning may seem more achievable on a small scale, the authors' argument of overhauling the American education system does not come without critique. The book's tone at times seems frustrated as the authors make their case for urgent ideological changes to the way we educate our children and "the need for more balanced and authentic measures of student progress" (p. 63). Domenech, Sherman, and Brown effectively point out significant issues with the current school system, but only provide brief prescriptions for these problems without going into extensive detail of their solutions, perhaps due to the grand scale of their scope in restructuring an entire education system. They look to existing models of personalized education plans, including those

for students with special needs, English language learners, and students of low socioeconomic status, to see how they could be expanded to personalize the American education system as a whole. Furthermore, since each school and school district is faced with its own unique set of student challenges, it only makes sense that each educational organization will define “personalized education” based on its own demographic makeup.

The authors emphasize technology usage to achieve their goals for establishing a personalized learning system. I applaud how the authors highlight the symbiotic relationship between technology as tool and the teacher as facilitator, and how one does not replace the other. Blended learning is a micro-level adjustment to personalizing education; therefore, the authors refer to it as taking positive steps towards a more problem-solving and inquiry-based instructional model that provides greater student agency, autonomy, and flexibility in the student learning process. This definition reinvents the teacher role, shifting the place of the teacher from the center of the learning experience to assisting students from the sidelines.

Educators must realize that technology is a continually growing force in society that has infiltrated schools. While technology does not act as a panacea to cure all problems of student achievement, it is a powerful tool for personalized learning transformation. While this book offers some good instructional strategies that move toward personalization, the authors do not provide specific examples of what tech applications, programs, or software are available to educators to help them realize their goal of constructing a personalized learning system. The examples of technology options afforded to students and how those options are utilized in a personalized learning environment lack details and specifics, thereby leaving educators to figure it out on their own. Perhaps the most

appealing aspect of technology use for personalized learning is the student’s access to content digitally from anywhere. While technology use through a blended – leading to a personalized – learning model may be quite effective in building greater digital literacy and fluency for students, the achievement gap will continue to exist if issues of access *outside* of the classroom are not addressed at an institutional level. The authors recognize the limitations to implementing a personalized learning system when they point out that schools without sufficient funds in socioeconomically disadvantaged or rural areas will have the most difficulty making the transition towards personalized learning, yet those populations are in most need of such revitalization.

In summary, the authors of *Personalizing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education* present an agreeable argument for restructuring American education and adopting a truly personalized learning system. They write in plain English, avoid unnecessary jargon, and state their arguments in simple terms that would appeal to the general public. The authors provide some general steps towards the implementation of each building block in their overall framework and address foreseen areas of resistance to their proposed personalized education model. This book offers some general suggestions to educators unfamiliar with how to start personalizing their curricula, such as incorporating tiered lessons, conducting orbital studies, and implementing complex instruction. However, from an academic perspective, the authors make sweeping generalizations and offer broad resolutions to educational issues based on small sample case studies and few personal narratives without providing adequate references to empirical research in support of their claims.

This book also offers a wealth of suggestions for personalization by providing general guidance for effectively addressing the

need for education transformation at a systemic level. While conceiving such transformative organizational change seems daunting given the current standardized, test-driven educational climate in schools today, the authors do provide several applicable examples, steps, and strategies that have the potential to lead educators toward the trajectory of an all-inclusive personalized learning and education system. The book is set up as an ongoing inquiry into personalized learning by providing educators with discussion questions concerning how well their own schools or school districts are addressing personalized learning at their sites. This allows for educators, administrators, and policy makers to have introspective conversations about their own thoughts and ideas, as well as, the policies and practices established in their own institutions that affect personalized learning and education. These weighty questions are intended to afford educators an opportunity to witness firsthand the ideological tenants of personalization, by either starting or continuing conversations about what personalized learning is and how it can be achieved or better implemented in their own organizations.

While I admire the idealism of the authors of this text, I recognize that such radical

systemic change will take years to come to fruition. They present big ideas on restructuring the standardized and traditional education system in lieu of a more blended learning approach rooted in technology use and grounded in personalized and performance-based assessment. Yet, big ideas call for big structural adjustments that many schools and districts are perhaps not ready to tackle. An effective personalized learning approach, as the authors introduce it, is one that will require a dramatic shift in mindset, years of planning and reorganization, a reestablishment of the priorities for the funding of each learner, and a vast amount of professional development for all stakeholders involved in the developmental processes of each student. Furthermore, university teacher preparation programs will need to adjust methodologies, coursework, and approaches to appropriately prepare student teachers for working with students in personalized learning environments. Needless to say, the authors of *Personalizing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education* take us far in their vision for personalizing the learning experiences of every child, yet if we are to reach the peaks of systemic personalized learning for all students in America, the educational community and society as a whole has much further to go.

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### About the Reviewer

**Jon McFarland** has been an educator for more than two decades, and has worked at multiple levels in public education. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Teacher Education with research interests including the utilization of gamification in academic settings, issues of student motivation and engagement, effective uses of educational technology, and matters of equity and diversity in secondary schools.



## Education Review

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