



The Potential for Personalized Learning: A Case Study

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Today, schools within British Columbia rank among the top in the world.¹ For this to continue, it is necessary to address the learning needs for students of the next generation. Improvements in parent engagement, use of technology, and individual assessment will form an education model more adaptive to personalization and flexibility demanded by the next generation of students and their families.

Hailey Moffat began her schooling career just prior to the turn of the twenty first century. Over the course of her thirteen years as a student, she attended five schools within British Columbia. For Hailey, elementary school was enjoyable and teachers were engaged and helpful. By the end of elementary school, however, Hailey became increasingly detached from the educational aspects of her schooling. Improvements in parent involvement would have been beneficial during this critical transition period for Hailey and her peers.

Parent involvement in education is essential. This is especially true at the transition point from elementary to junior high. This is when students are moving from learning foundation skills (reading and writing) to using these skills (critically analyzing a resource and using it to develop an argument). Parent participation does not necessarily entail parents teaching in the classroom; rather, their participation should facilitate collaboration on learning strategies, direction, and assessment.

During her years as a high school student, Hailey found very few teachers to be actively engaged. Although school became appropriately more self directed, it was also less interesting. In grade ten, Hailey transferred to a large school in an attempt to find enrichment. Unfortunately, the larger school offered even fewer engaged teachers per capita and honours classes fell short of Hailey's expectations. Enrichment consisted primarily of a few extra projects per course, but did not improve student engagement or interest.

Personalized learning has been recognized as a provincial goal;^{2,3} however, most schools are far from achieving this objective. Appropriate assessment and flexibility are essential to improving learning outcomes for high achievers, new students, and those with learning disabilities alike. Assessment is key to improving and providing personalized learning and needs to shift from assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning. One model for making this a reality is the elimination of both letter grades (marks) and number grades (based on age) and moving to a system that assesses concept comprehension so students progress only when ready. According to Salman Khan, founder of the Khan Academy, without a revised assessment model there is a kind of "Swiss cheese learning."⁴ When students are not allowed to master concepts at their own pace, the result is holes in their knowledge. Khan uses the example of teaching life skills in this manner; it is akin to a student

1 OECD Program for International Assessment (PSA) rankings

2 http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/dist_learning/21century_learning.htm

3 http://www.gov.bc.ca/premier/attachments/PTC_vision%20for_education.pdf

4 <http://www.khanacademy.org>

being graded a fifty percent passing grade on knowledge of bicycles and then being expected to ride a unicycle. It is much more effective to assess full comprehension of a concept before students are encouraged to continue (e.g. ensuring students have learned to read before being required to read to learn). The current “one-size-fits-all” learning model must change to effectively meet individual learning styles and paces.

In grade eleven, Hailey was still searching for an enriched learning experience and as a result traveled abroad with her family while schooling online. Hailey and her family significantly underestimated the time commitment related to this choice. Teacher contact was almost exclusively via email. Responses were often delayed, and information was sometimes lacking. Self motivation and extremely supportive parents were the key to Hailey’s success. Through notes and some outside references were provided, there were few courses that included lectures or enhancement through a wide range of mediums. As well, course assignments reflected a model more appropriate to face-to-face delivery than a distance learning model.

Technology will be crucial in next-generation education. Currently, technology is being used in a hyper-controlled fashion. Administration and parents struggle with incorporating new devices in an effective manner. Innovation and creativity are essential for determining the use of computers, cell phones, SMART boards, and tablets. Instead of forty-five minute sessions in a computer lab, students and staff need continued access to internet wirelessly. Rather than prohibiting cell phone usage, students should be encouraged to communicate freely on projects and assignments. Finally, communication tools such as Skype and Elluminate are applied as substitute lectures instead of allowing students to converse with community leaders, scientists, writers, and other knowledgeable professionals around the world.

Now in grade twelve, Hailey has returned to mainstream high school after a year abroad. The switch from “everything at your own pace” to the regimented program of an in-school senior year has proven more difficult than expected. The pace is always either too fast or too slow. Relationships with teachers are attainable, but mainly through student persistence. Technology, though widely used, is often implemented inefficiently and in a manner that hinders learning. In short, Hailey’s graduation year has been educational, but fell far short of its potential.

British Columbia’s education system is currently one of the best in the world, but there has never been a more vulnerable time for education. As the former US Secretary of Education Richard Riley so aptly conveys, the top ten in-demand jobs in 2010 did not even exist in 2004. “We are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist, using technologies that haven’t been invented, in order to solve problems we don’t even know are problems yet.”⁵ Any education system serious about meeting the demands of the next generation of students must engage all partners (parents, students, teachers, administration, and communities) in revamping their entire model with innovative use of technology and individual assessment at the heart of their program.