Reclaiming PERSONALIZED LEARNING

A PEDAGOGY FOR RESTORING EQUITY AND HUMANITY IN OUR CLASSROOMS
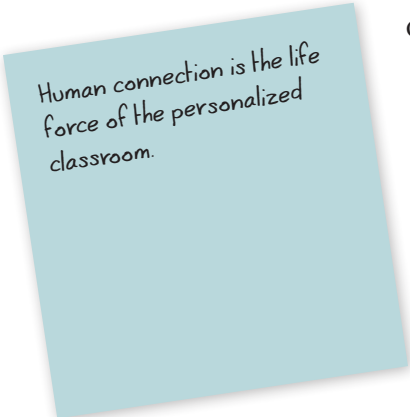
Second Edition

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CORWIN

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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from Reclaiming Personalized Learning.

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After each summative assessment, my students brought their portfolios home, sharing this feedback with their parents. I attached a separate sheet for parents to document their conversations with their children (see Figure 2.8), ensuring that the conversations occurred and that parents and guardians were in the loop about their progress. But most of all, these reflections build *mastery* in our students, helping them clearly articulate and observe within themselves the ways they've grown, slowly nurturing their inner dialogues toward self-reflection.

STRATEGIES FOR NURTURING THE INNER DIALOGUE

Nurturing the inner dialogue requires a presence of mind and compassionate responsiveness to student behavior. It requires vulnerability and a relinquishing of the shame that comes from unmet expectations. It necessitates a complete immersion into the process of learning because it is within this messy process that we connect with our humanity and connect with one another.

Human connection is the life force of the personalized classroom.

Connection is foundational to the human condition, and therefore it is foundational to the human experience of learning, as well. It is connection that allows us to continue learning conversations, to tolerate the discomfort that accompanies novel experiences, and to revel in the joy that comes with learning. Human connection is, by all means, the life force of the classroom and the life force of personalized learning. And it makes sense because human connection unites all three dimensions of personalized learning.

To nurture the inner dialogues of a diverse group of learners, we must leverage human connection, because our students must trust one another and their teachers enough to consent to have their inner dialogues nurtured by the interpersonal conversations and feedback that permeate the classroom. As a result, we must create psychologically, emotionally, and physically safe spaces where students allow themselves and their identities to be shaped by the external forces of the classroom. Doing so allows educators an entry point into this inner dialogue so that we might build agency within learners, using effective feedback and efficient conferencing to reach all students. In the next chapter, we'll more acutely define learner agency and identify ways to nurture students' inner dialogues toward greater agency by emphasizing executive functioning, incentivizing vulnerability, and creating self-reflective cultures of goal-setting.

PROVIDING SPECIFIC, ACTIONABLE, AND PERSONALIZED FEEDBACK

Giving feedback is an art. It is a strong indicator of flexible and responsive teaching, and as a result, it's a cornerstone of humanized pedagogy. It is the conversation that keeps learning going in our classrooms. Here are some tips for giving feedback in the classroom.

Tip	Example 1 (Writing)	Example 2 (Math)
Ask if you can give feedback.	"Can I give you some feedback?"	"Are you ready for some feedback?"
Start with praise and provide a rationale.	"I really liked your lead because it helped me make a movie in my mind."	"That method seems really logical to me because it goes in order."
Balance praise with constructive, honest, and specific feedback providing a rationale.	"Have you considered starting with dialogue? It might make the story come to life even more."	"I can see that you've put the steps in order, but it's unclear to me how you got from step three to step four."
Make it actionable by making a recommendation or providing some advice.	"What sorts of things did the characters say or do? Make a list of those things, and choose one that might work for this lead."	"Prove to me that crossing out the 4 and making it a 3 works. Try it with another method. You can draw a picture or use base-ten blocks."
Ask the child to summarize the feedback and/or the recommendation.	"Can you summarize the feedback I gave you?"	"Let's review. What are you going to do before I check in with you again?"
Follow up in a timely manner.	"I'm excited to see what dialogue you've chosen! Can you show me?"	"How did that other method go? Were you able to prove it in a different way?"

Effective feedback matters for all grades, even with our youngest learners. Nolan, one of my kindergarten students, *loved* to give feedback. And when I say loved, I mean it was probably one of his favorite things to do. After learning about feedback in our classroom, he would wander around the classroom asking anyone who would listen if he could give feedback.

Alas, Nolan did not enjoy receiving feedback as much as he enjoyed handing it out. In fact, one day, it was Nolan's turn to be in the author's chair. He read his writing and smiled up at me afterward.

Another student, Lex, raised his hand.

"Nolan, can I give you some feedback?" Lex said.

"No, thanks," Nolan replied matter-of-factly.

I nearly died laughing. Even so, it was important to me to honor Nolan's choice. It's true, after all, that some days we don't want feedback. Sometimes we're just not in the mood, and other times, we just want to feel seen and heard. Feedback is not, by any means, always necessary, and at that moment, Nolan was communicating something about himself to all of us—not to mention providing me some great data on his cognitive flexibility.

"Okay, Nolan, well, if you don't want feedback right now, I think we should let someone else sit in the author's chair. Thanks for sharing."

He went back to his seat on the carpet, participating in the remainder of sharing, offering feedback to many of his friends. It wasn't long before he wanted to sit in the author's chair another day. As you might guess, the same thing happened again. He turned down the opportunity to get feedback, but this time I was prepared.

"Nolan, it makes me feel yellow when you go in the author's chair but won't accept feedback," I said to him in front of the class, referring to the Zones of Regulation (more on this in Chapter 3). "If we are going to learn, it's important that we open ourselves up to feedback from others, just like your friends do for you."

Nolan looked down at the ground, his large chestnut eyes softening.

"Okay, Paul," he said to me with a knowing tone. "Bailey, you can give me some feedback."

From that point on, he was much more open to feedback, and as a result, he learned a lesson that many adults struggle to understand: Feedback is beneficial, even when it makes us uncomfortable.

In this authentic, humanizing, and utterly personal moment, Nolan's learning was not about writing or even about feedback itself; it was about vulnerability and an acknowledgment of imperfection. What's more, my response to him was not one of compliance but instead one of a social agreement—that he would be held accountable to the collective norms of our classroom culture.

To be a part of the collective conscious of the classroom, he had to sign the social contract and act in an equitable manner. But the beauty of it is that this lesson came as a result of giving Nolan the agency to choose the

feedback, which he so autonomously decided not to do. If I had not allowed him to make this choice, explore his own autonomy, and better understand the effects of the choices he was making, he may not have learned this valuable lesson about vulnerability and feedback. It was one he learned quickly, and he soon felt comfortable receiving feedback from the group regularly.

CONFERENCING WITH EFFICIENCY

Sustainability must be at the center of all classroom practices, personalization especially. It likely goes without saying that finding time to regularly conference with each of your students will be challenging. Embracing the workshop model is essential for carving out time for conferencing. In an ideal world, the minilesson portion of the workshop will require only ten to fifteen minutes, leaving you with thirty to forty minutes for small-group work and conferences in a typical hour-long block.

Workshop time goes quickly, and so it's important to conference mindfully, making intentional choices around how to conference efficiently, ensuring you can maximize your time and reach as many students as possible over the course of a learning block. Here are some tips for doing so.

Narrow the Scope of Your Feedback

Perfectionism plagues education. To this day, I have a hard time narrowing the scope of my feedback, and I'm sure it's because I was raised and trained within an education system that incentivized me to make sure everything was perfect. We must remember that progress is incremental and that striving for perfection is not only harmful but also inefficient and unsustainable. Narrowing the scope of your feedback within a conference nurtures a child's inner dialogue gradually, meanwhile combating the harm, inefficiency, and unsustainability of perfectionism. I recommend providing one compliment and one piece of constructive criticism on which you can easily follow up in the next conference.

Conference in Groups

You may be accustomed to pulling small groups for skill-based lessons, but you can also pull heterogeneous groups to make conferencing more efficient. When calling students for small-group conferences, make sure they all have something to work on while not in conference with you. This usually entails continuing the task from the minilesson. Then, speak with each student one by one, offering them feedback.

In some cases, it may be appropriate to have students make adjustments to their work. While conferencing with other students in the group you've just pulled, students can follow up on your feedback while still within proximity, allowing you to see if they incorporated your feedback.

Use Journals as Conduits for Feedback

In Chapter 6, we'll discuss journaling, and specifically, we'll explore how journaling can be one of your most powerful tools for learner-driven personalization. While you can conference with students around recent assessments or other activities, my students' journals have often provided the most authentic work samples for conferencing. As a result, I may use a student's response to a math task, a writing sample from writing workshop, or a thinking journal response as a conduit for feedback.
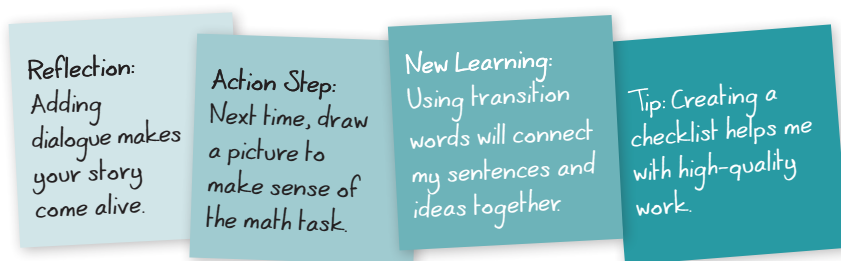
It's critical that *all* students receive conferencing time with the teacher, and keeping conferences efficient supports this. Moreover, keeping conferences short is best for kids. If we inundate our students with feedback, they will become overwhelmed. This is another reason for limiting feedback in their journals to one strength and one challenge, mirroring the aforementioned reflection structure. This keeps things efficient, meanwhile inching students along in their progress.

Create a Continuous Feedback Loop

Conferences are especially powerful when there is connectivity between them. Sometimes after a conference, I will ask students to follow up on my feedback and incorporate it into their work.

"Next time we check in," I say, "I am going to be looking to see that you incorporated my feedback."

To document this feedback, I place small sticky notes in their journals as a reminder of our conversation. They might say something like:

> Reflection: Adding dialogue makes your story come alive.

> Action Step: Next time, draw a picture to make sense of the math task.

> New Learning: Using transition words will connect my sentences and ideas together.

> Tip: Creating a checklist helps me with high-quality work.

These sticky notes allow for easy documentation and for you, the teacher, to easily remember the contents of your past conversations, creating a continuous feedback loop that allows for easy follow-up. Most of all, this documentation allows you to see the story of your students' ever-evolving inner dialogues over the course of the year.