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Karen Clancy
University of Kentucky

Whitney Powell
University of Kentucky

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Author Biography

Karen Clancy, Ph.D., MBA, Assistant Professor, University of Kentucky, College of Health Sciences, teaches finance and management, leadership, ethics, and health administration practice. Clancy earned her Ph.D. in Higher Education from the University of Kentucky, College of Education. She has held leadership roles in higher education and healthcare administration. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9993-0931

Whitney Powell, LSW, MSW, works as a social worker in foster care and community practice serving youth and families in and around Cleveland, Ohio. Powell also works as part of a research team at the University of Kentucky, College of Health Sciences. Powell earned her MSW from the University of Kentucky, College of Social Work.

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Personalized Learning: Tools for a COVID World

Karen Clancy and Whitney L. Powell
University of Kentucky

Advancing technology allows us to personalize everyday life, from shopping and business transactions to information-seeking, healthcare, and education. Contemporary college students often seek personalized learning experiences that yield high-impact outcomes. Such experiences require successful partnerships between faculty and students. Case studies demonstrating how faculty/student partnerships helped students accomplish personalized learning outcomes are presented. The focus on personalized learning is even more pertinent in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The increased reliance on virtual learning and independent study may encourage and challenge educators to implement personalized learning methods to maximize learning outcomes and elevate student engagement.

Contemporary technology allows us to personalize every aspect of daily life. Experiences such as online shopping, banking, business transactions, information-seeking, education, social networking, and even religious engagement can be customized to our unique preferences in today's high-tech world. We seek and anticipate personalized experiences. The desire for personalization spills over into education and academia, where up-and-coming generations of students actively engage in personalized lifestyles.

Personalized learning is described as an individualized experience that takes into account learner variability in order to optimize the achievement of learning outcomes (Dockterman, 2018; Rojanasarot, et al., 2018; Tang, et al., 2019). Students often initiate personalized learning experiences. Furthermore, "learning objectives, instructional approaches, and instructional content (and its sequencing) all may vary based on learner needs" (United States Department of Education, 2020). Notably, it is the variability in learner needs, interests, and motivation that can and will shape educational plans for each student.

In today's fast-paced, highly competitive environment, college students seek personalized learning experiences that yield higher-impact outcomes. Such experiences provide opportunities for students to develop personal learning goals and strategies to leverage academic challenges and competency pursuits

according to learner variability. Evidence suggests that allowing students to develop personalized learning objectives positively influences learner engagement, interest, and motivation (Reber et al., 2018).

This article describes three qualitative case studies where faculty partnered with students to accomplish personalized learning outcomes. Partnership arrangements, challenges, successes, outcomes, and feedback from the students are discussed. Additionally, this paper will offer strategies that successfully engage contemporary students to develop learning objectives, venues, and schedules to gain higher-impact outcomes.

Institutional and Program Context

The personalized learning case studies were piloted within the context of the Clinical Leadership and Management Program in the College of Health Sciences at the University of Kentucky. Students completing this program earn a bachelor of health sciences degree. The curriculum includes courses in leadership, business, management, health services, quality, ethics, and practicum experiences. Graduates are prepared to enter the healthcare work environment. They are also equipped to pursue advanced studies in programs such as the Masters of Health Administration (MHA), and the Masters of Business Administration (MBA).

The case studies, conducted in the spring and summer of 2019, involved students seeking personalized learning strategies to meet and exceed course learning objectives. The pilot experiences involved:

1. Case Study One - A student who requested to earn Honors credit for an *Ethics in Health Services Management* course

2. Case Study Two - A student who requested to complete her health administration practicum at a legislative office in Washington DC

3. Case Study Three - Students who requested flexible summer health administration practicums to accommodate study abroad opportunities and a military obligation

Overview of Strategy, Approach, or Concept

Case Study One

The first case involved a student who requested to earn Honors course credits while enrolled in a junior-level *Ethics in Health Services Management* course. The course introduces students to moral reasoning and ethics principles relevant

to ethical dilemmas likely to be encountered in the healthcare industry. Basic concepts, methods, and resources for ethical decision-making in healthcare administration are covered. Student Learning Objectives are established at Bloom's levels of Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, and Analysis (Bloom, 1956; Stanny, 2016).

The student and instructor partnered to design a personalized learning contract at the beginning of the course that defined learning outcomes and strategies to enhance the regular course requirements. The strategies included regular communication, discussion about learning enrichment ideas, support and troubleshooting, and individualized feedback. The student agreed to develop an *Ethics in Health Care* journal, reflecting on what she was learning and how it applied to her practicum experiences. She also agreed to write a final essay about the applications of ethics principles and concepts in healthcare. In addition to the achievement of course learning outcomes, the student demonstrated Bloom's levels of Synthesis and Evaluation in her personalized work by relating knowledge from different areas to create new ideas and defend complex arguments (Bloom, 1956; Stanny, 2016). Overall, the student expressed satisfaction from the experience and used what she learned in her final practicum course work. Upon graduation from the program, the student accepted an opportunity to study at a nationally ranked law school. She reported that the opportunity to develop a personalized experience helped to cultivate her interest in health care law.

Case Study Two

A junior student requested to complete her health administration practicum at a legislative office in Washington DC. She applied to a program called *Wildcats at the Capitol* that allows students to complete political science studies under the guidance of legislative leaders. The student requested to substitute the political science internship credits for Clinical Leadership and Management practicum credits. Once the involved colleges and programs approved, the student and instructor collaboratively created learning outcomes and strategies focused on health policy and advocacy. The student completed the requirements of the personalized practicum remotely.

Additionally, she met weekly with the instructor via phone conferences to ask questions, to discuss activities and upcoming plans, and to reflect on her experiences. During her experience, the student developed a suicide prevention telephone triage procedure for the Veterans Administration and an infographic

communication tool. At the end of her practicum, she reported that her experience was highly valuable and allowed her to grow professionally.

Case Study Three

Two students planning to enroll in summer health administration practicums requested flexibility to accommodate study abroad opportunities and a military National Guard obligation. In general, the practicum course structure requires students to complete a specified number of onsite contact hours spread across a semester. On particular dates, students submit reflection assignments, assessments of their organizations, periodic evaluations by their preceptors, and other academic assignments. Accommodations of student requests for personalized schedules was achieved by revising the summer course deadlines from a "date due" model to a "percentage completion of site contact hours" model. For example, the two students were required to submit specific assignments at 10% completion, 20% completion, 30% completion, and so forth, rather than submission of assignments by specific dates. "Last possible date" deadlines were established to reflect the University's semester deadlines. The modification was offered to all students enrolled in the summer practicum course. Of note, the two students who requested a modified schedule were the only students to complete the course objectives and assignments early. Both received high evaluations from their preceptors, and they excelled at their academic assignments. After completing their practicums utilizing a personalized schedule, the Study Abroad student traveled to France to study global health care systems, and the military student fulfilled his National Guard obligations.

Analysis/Assessment

The case studies outlined in this article describe the utility of student access to personalized education in undergraduate professional practicum studies and an ethics course. The current literature explores personalized learning as an educational intervention focused on increasing situational and personal interest, giving way to increased and sustained motivation (Rojanasarot et al., 2018; Dockterman, 2018). Educators care about interest and motivation leading to increased learning and long-term application of learned knowledge and skills as students move into their respective career fields (Reber et al., 2018).

Interest in learning and within the educational environment can be understood by looking at situational interest and personal interest. A model developed by Hidi and Renniger (2006) explains that situational interest comes before personal

interest; thus, educators must seek ways to increase situational interest if they hope to capture a student's personal interest. According to this model, the first task is to pursue triggered situational interest with students, which entails presenting information and educational experiences that are readily enjoyable to students. Thereafter, maintained situational interest could be pursued with students, which requires that materials and learning experiences appeal to student values and interests. Once students experience sustained situational interest, personal interest can occur and persist as students choose to engage and re-engage in educational experiences that foster their interests and values. Overall, it is of great value for educators to consider materials and educational approaches they are using with students if they hope to elicit both situational and personal interest.

These case studies also demonstrate the effectiveness and value of 1) customizing learning content and tasks for each student, 2) providing students with alternatives for learning approaches, and 3) engaging students through personalized learning opportunities. The current literature demonstrates that context personalization is important for fostering personal interest in educational tasks (Reber et al., 2018). Educators who take the time to understand personal needs, values, and expectations, may create learning interventions that trigger situational interest as well as personal interest.

Beyond functional engagement, the published literature on active personalization highlights how important it is to let students identify the connection between their learning experiences and their value and application. When an educator provides opportunities for active personalization within an education plan or intervention, students get to be the ones to describe and explore the value of their experience in the greater context of education and future work (Yusuff, 2018).

Personalized learning strategies can help students accommodate their interests, values, preferences, and needs. Dockterman (2018) described the historical attempts to provide mass education to address the varying needs of learners. He discussed the importance of a "personalization-based pedagogy" that assumes each student is different. Dockterman further proposed that emerging technology combined with the emphasis on personalized learning may help reduce the number of children "left behind" in American education (p. 5).

Discussion and Considerations

The current literature explores personalized learning in many ways, primarily seeking to determine methods and strategies that improve student interest and enhance learning outcomes. Studies focus on interest, both situational and personal, and explore the implications of interest in regards to its effect on engagement, learning outcomes, the perceived value of education, and motivation (Reber et al., 2018). As illustrated through these three case studies, the clear benefit of engaging students in ways that elicit short-term situational interest and long-term personal interest is the enhancement of learning outcomes and the student-defined value of their experiences.

One body of personalized learning research focuses on using computer algorithms to scaffold learning in automated environments (Tang et al., 2019). However, the examination of qualitative case studies supports the value of flexibility and adaptability in the context of higher education. Students within these three case studies surpassed course expectations and performed in extraordinary ways because their learning needs were met through the learning contract and education plan. Instructor adaptability leveraged the use of learner variability to foster enhanced learning, interest, and motivation.

The case studies presented in this paper also highlight the inherent and unique value of the student-educator relationship during the learning process. Educators engage in partnerships with students pursuing personalized learning approaches. Such partnerships can be both rewarding and challenging for the educator. When instructors are able to facilitate a high level of student engagement and learning outcome achievement, the experience can be incredibly satisfying. However, when the outcome is not positive, the experience can be unsatisfactory. Furthermore, personalized learning requires effort and commitment, as educators invest time and resources into the design, support, monitoring and assessment of the personalized learning plan and student learning outcomes. Future studies should explore the vast implications of this student-educator relationship not just for the student but for the educator as well.

The three cases presented herein provide a glimpse into possibilities. Further quantitative and qualitative studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of personalized learning strategies in various fields of contemporary study. Furthermore, the value of personalized learning may be even more relevant in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic that has rapidly forced colleges and universities to move to synchronous and asynchronous online learning.

The reliance on virtual learning, further challenges educators to find creative strategies that enhance learner engagement. Educators are seeking ways to motivate and engage students who are struggling with isolation, depression, confusion, and grief in a COVID-19 world. Personalized learning adds value to the teaching process, motivates and engages students, and has the potential to yield deeper learning and high-impact outcomes. Educators should explore the use of personalized learning strategies in their COVID-19 classroom environments.

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