

No. 1 Fall 2018

VARIATIONS^{2e}

Not all great minds think alike

*Discovering
2e everywhere*

Educational Stories from Around the World

From Parents to Champions | Individualizing for the Twice-Exceptional Learner
My Story, My School | The Challenges of Identification | How to Create a 2e Movement



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The Yellow Hibiscus
State Flower of Hawai'i

Hawai'i, USA: Individualized learning for the 2e learner

STUDENTS FORGE THEIR OWN PATHS

by Susannah Johnson, M.Ed.

The author is a four-time presenter at the Schools of the Future Conference and received her Master of Education degree in 2016. Following many years in the business world, she found her way into the classroom 11 years ago and discovered her true passion. Philosophically, Susannah sees her role in the classroom more as a learning facilitator and co-worker than a traditional teacher. She believes that when students drive their own education, they undergo a dynamic journey of lifelong thinking and learning. She continues to evolve her educational strategies, using her own global explorations to build ideas that drive individualized curriculum in critical thinking for students in Grades 9-12.

ON THE FIRST DAY

of school at Assets in Honolulu, Hawai'i, while other teachers are handing out syllabi, going over rules, or engaging in get-to-know-you activities, students in the Flex program are thinking about what they need in order to work productively and what makes it difficult for them to learn. They write each of their ideas on a Post-It note. By day two, they are amassing their ideas and categorizing them within the concept of a coworking space, using the first few steps of Hoshin Kanri's planning process. Then they create a visual concept with a few peers, finally moving the room around to suit their learning needs as a collective group. Developing the coworking concept

initiates the key thinking behind 100 percent individualized learning—students leading their own learning, which is the fundamental aim of the Flex program.

Most days, when students walk into the space it is up to them to determine what they will be working on for the day. They also keep track of timelines and set their own homework assignments. For instance, one student working on an integrated photojournalism project would set forth questions and make a plan for expected outcomes in a day, then he would leave campus to take photos, writing about his work that evening. This same student, a true minimalist

in conventional classroom routines, would text when he was done for the day, often working as late as 8 p.m.

As described in our mission statement, Assets “serves gifted and capable students, specializing in those with dyslexia and other language-based learning differences. We provide a strength-based program, complemented by outreach and training, that empowers students to become effective learners and confident self-advocates.” Toward that end, students find a genuine interest in learning and devise a learning plan that best suits their learning needs, styles, and preferences.

At Assets, all classrooms include differentiation, personalization, and some degree of individualizing by meeting students where they are; the Flex program opens up individualization to curricula, content, time, and space.

Flex is one of many components of our highly differentiated practices. The program is in its second year officially, but individualized learning was built over many years working with 2e students. At the apex of inspiration, they are labeled “gifted,” yet they do not fit completely into that box, and are also labeled “learning disabled,” which does not fit them either. As a result they have difficulty in standardized educational settings of any kind. Understanding the frustration that results from trying to fit students into these separate categories and meet their respective expectations means that, before a 2e learner can learn, we have to unlock the gifts by working through and around the challenges. Tapping into personal passions supports curiosity and lays an additional foundation for ownership of learning.

The Flex program — sparked eight years ago by a particularly complex, creative, busy student — found ways to balance challenge and support for 2e learners to catalyze individualized learning. One current student, Chris,

was already exceeding expectations as a freshman in many of his classes and clearly desired more challenge. However, he had difficulty with long-term focus and investment when he did not feel connected to the content and the nuanced complexities of his own thinking. In addition, he grappled with peer interactions and working with

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others. His first year of individualized work started with a creative writing project with a character borne out of his imagination, developing a plot through critical-thinking questions about values and philosophical traits. He responded well to being in charge of his work, appreciating the autonomy and flexibility as well as being able to dialogue with like-minded peers and me when needed.

Seeing one of many students doing well with heavily individualized work within a regular course, we forged Flex. Through his second year, and the pilot year of Flex, Chris drove his own growth and learning, pushing his own skill set to take on more realistic writing, and moving on to studying psychology as a means to build richness in characters through human understanding.

As a senior, Chris, inspired by the work of a peer, began developing more of a

photojournalistic approach to his work. While his writing and comprehension growth is evident, what stood out in his learning journey was his increasing capacity for critical thinking. Logic, purpose, implications, points of view, intellectual integrity, and courage are at the forefront of his endeavors each day. He readily applies critical thinking by supporting peers, especially those new to the process, something he was reluctant to do three years ago, growing as a human and as a learner as he drove his own learning.

As students in the Flex program build their individual curricula, the teacher’s role shifts to process and logistical support partner, helping students to plan and think critically about individual work as they provide ongoing feedback, ensure credit requirements are being met, or point to specific resources and templates. Along the way, students are developing essential skills in setting deadlines, determining what “A” outcomes will look like using personalized rubrics, and asking essential questions related to their work.

Critical thinking is the only “core content” that all students share as they practice direct strategies based on the Dr. Richard Paul’s work, *The Foundation for Critical Thinking*, and Bloom’s Taxonomy, which is used for guiding thinking within coursework as well as peer-to-peer critique sessions. Depending on the learning styles and skill development of 33 students working on 42 types of curricula, the program enables students to seek credits in English, social studies, science, and electives, working on online courses and college credits. The program also naturally incorporates service-, project-based, inquiry-driven, problem-based, place-based, and culture-based learning.

Flex stretches traditional notions of time and space in a school setting, as some students leave campus to work on projects, meet with experts, or head to college classes a couple of

days a week, using their days in Flex to do the necessary work. Students regularly meet one-on-one with the supporting teacher, reflecting upon and self-assessing their work, and are continuously reaching toward what is next in their learning. The relaxed environment creates a safe space as well for the disquietude or trepidation that many 2e learners feel. In the reflective words of students:

"I have discovered that this type of individual course works really well for me. I successfully accomplished my goal and learned some aspects about myself of which I was previously unaware. I improved my time management skills and became more comfortable with self-direction. In conclusion, I feel like this Flex program was a great learning experience and has given me an advantage when it

comes to how well I understand my learning style."

"I really hope more people get to do this. It was nice to feel like I'm in charge of my learning."

"I believe the critical thinking tools helped everyone's project because they are universal. Class reflections also helped a lot. We were able to get peer feedback in a constructive and respectful manner. Assets Flex was the best class experience I've had."

The sighs of relief that come from 2e learners when they realize the pressure is off for them to learn like everyone else or how everyone else thinks they should learn are the greatest reward of Flex. As an educator, and now a coworker in learning, I could not ask for higher praise. Moving forward, we

are looking at the success of Flex as one of many options to provide education that is more connected, meaningful, and reflective of our growing global community. Essential questions and problems of practice center primarily around how we best demonstrate learning or mastery when meeting each student where they are and progressing from there. Personally, I look forward to continued relationships with such independent, critically thinking, self-aware, supportive, and flexible humans throughout their lives as lifelong learners.

"Share & Support" peer critique protocol based in Elements and Standards of Critical Thinking

