

A Customized Approach to Student Learning

by Curtis Chandler



As teachers, we must seek to move beyond traditional, prescriptive classrooms and instead, utilize tools and techniques that meet students where they are right now—tools and techniques that make learning accessible, meaningful, and fun.

Not too long ago, my four boys went outside, disappeared for a couple of hours, and then returned home in a heated debate over some mysterious eggs that they had discovered at the edge of a pond located a short distance from our house. Despite the fact that our home lies nearly 1,000 miles inland, the youngest boy insisted that that the eggs were from a crocodile. His hope was to get a hold of a few hatchlings, raise them to full maturity, and train them to keep intruders out of our yard. While his older brothers both scoffed at the 'croc theory,' they could not come to an agreement about what type of eggs they had actually found. One of them insisted that they had been left by a turtle, but the oldest brother argued vehemently that

turtles usually buried their eggs...so it was more likely that a snake or a bird was the culprit.

For days they sought to uncover everything they could about various animals in the area. They photographed the eggs, showed them to everyone they knew, debated, and—in their own words—are now looking for an 'egg-spert' to settle it once and for all. The 'egg incident,' as my wife and I now refer to it, reminded us both of the impassioned, deep learning that often transpires when young people are permitted to explore their own interests on their own terms. But this event has also caused me to reflect on the need to do something similar in the classroom—to transform traditional learning practices into more customized learning experiences where students are encouraged to employ choice and self-regulation in their own studies.

By definition, customized learning seeks to gear classroom content, instruction, and other aspects of learning toward individual students, their unique interests, and past learning experiences (Hattie, 2009). As of late, a multitude of research findings have underscored the importance of learning activities that encourage student control over the learning process (Ewen, & Topping, 2012; McLoughlin & Lee, 2010). While student characteristics such as learning styles have long been recognized as factors that may affect learning (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004; Felder & Silverman, 1988; Keefe, 1979), the use of other individual differences between students to guide instruction is still largely viewed as an "innovation" in education (Raman & Nedungadi, 2012). According

to Horizon Report (2011), **the real potential of a personalized approach to learning lies in teachers' exploration of ways to customize curriculum, instruction, and even assessment in ways that differ from person to person, and student to student.**

It is no small coincidence that some of the most popular tools amongst young people outside of school, such as video games, are successful largely due to their ability to extend control and choice to learners through customization of play (Chandler, 2013). In the world of X-boxes and Play Stations, customization means that players are able to adjust the game to accommodate their own interests, style, and objectives. Gee (2007) observed that classrooms adopting this principle would allow students to discover their favored learning styles and to try new ones without fear. In the act of customizing their own learning, students would learn a good deal about their own thinking, reflection, and ways of solving problems.

I recently came across a free teaching tool called Actively Learn that makes it simpler than ever for teachers to customize text-based assignments in ways that make reading more accessible to students. The tool enhances reading passages with 'layers,' or combinations of embedded, common-core aligned questions, images, notes, and even multimedia-like audio and video clips to help provide students with contextual information. My own students and I tried it out, and really found it quite easy to use. They particularly enjoyed some of the quasi-collaborative

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OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIP AND SPECIAL NEEDS GRANTS

On February 1, 2014, history will be made in North Carolina. This is the date when the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority (NCSEAA) will provide application information on its website, www.ncseaa.edu, so parents can apply for the new North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship Grants. The NCSEAA will begin awarding scholarship grants to parents on March 1, 2014. The NC General Assembly provided funding for approximately 2,500 students. However, if there is a large number of applicants, additional funds will be requested.

The new Children with Disabilities Scholarship Grant for special needs students also begins in 2014, and priority will be given to students who received a tax credit during the previous semester. Applications for the spring 2014 semester are currently available on the State Education Assistance Authority website (www.ncseaa.edu).

Participating schools need to make parents aware of these opportunities. Typically, one of the best advertisements for schools are satisfied parents. Since these grants are currently available only to parents whose children are enrolled in public schools, it is important to let them know how to apply. Schools might ask their current parents to provide the names of potential applicants to contact. Current parents could also point family members, neighbors, or co-workers to information about the grants.

A website has been designed for parents to see if they qualify for the grant: www.schoolchoicenc.org. Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina (www.pefnc.org) is providing good information that can be posted on a school's website or distributed to prospective parents. ***Please click [this link](#) to download the following information:***

1. Opportunity Scholarship Handout
2. Parent Eligibility Handout
3. Top 10 Things Schools Must Know Handout
4. Sample Cover Letter for Parents
5. Special Needs Scholarship Handout

If you have any questions, please email Dr. Joe Haas [here](#).



Doesn't your child deserve a choice?

Opportunity Scholarships empower you to choose

features that allowed them to view and comment on the responses of other students after answering questions on their own.

On the teacher side of things, I was able to use pre-loaded texts from the system or could upload my own. When the students finished, I had the option of manually reviewing student responses or could have the tool grade it for me. What I was really impressed by, however, was the well-developed analytics tool that allowed me to measure with precision how my students performed on specific types of literacy tasks. A complete video demonstration of the tool can be found [here](#).

With or without tools like Actively Learn, however, we as teachers can do more to customize learning and to make it increasingly accessible to students. For example, not too long ago, I observed a ninth grade math teacher who started class by asking her students to help her determine how many stars exist in the known universe. She explained that before looking at any formulas or equations used by other mathematicians, she wanted to hear how her students might go about solving the problem and insisted that there were likely several valid approaches. Students were given the option of working alone or with others, and then worked to formulate

responses. The class period was spent sharing, evaluating, and revising various approaches created by students. The following day, students were asked to self-select a station where they could review the theories of accomplished scientists either by listening, watching, or reading excerpts of commentaries by various astronomers and mathematicians. Students then worked at their stations to discuss and critique the various theoretical approaches. The instructor pointed out that the experts in the field utilized different approaches to solving the problem, and that many disagreed on the estimated number of stars. In this way, her students learned that this activity's design was not to achieve a single "right" answer in mathematics, but rather to pose questions, explore, analyze, and develop the ability to reason. Be it in math or other content areas, teachers can work to create opportunities for reflective learning, developing strategies, and selecting learning styles appropriate to specific learning tasks (Coffield et al., 2004).

Regardless of which approach we take in our attempts to personalize student learning, there exists a great need for teachers to spend more time and energy learning through the eyes of the students and to design pedagogy that capitalizes on their interest and readiness to learn (Hattie, 2009). The development

and implementation of customized learning and personalized pedagogy takes time, but will be well worth it. Educating today's young people requires us to really get to know our students—their interests, strengths, and approaches to learning—and to use this information to customize the learning that takes place inside of our classrooms. While we cannot provide a pond and mysterious eggs for every young person in our schools, we can work more conscientiously to personalize learning. As teachers, we must seek to move beyond traditional, prescriptive classrooms and instead, utilize tools and techniques that meet students where they are right now—tools and techniques that make learning accessible, meaningful, and fun.

This article was written by Curtis Chandler, an Education Specialist, Staff Developer, and Keynote Speaker working with ESSDACK to improve the instructional capacity of schools.

*****If you are interested in utilizing online learning for Credit Recovery, Electives, or Advanced Placement Courses, or if you wish to research new Blended Learning models that leverage technology, please contact Jason Haas [here](#). This is a great way to market new learning to your parents and to reach the digital generation in ways that traditional education cannot.***

2014-2015 NCCSA Calendars



The 2014-2015 NCCSA calendars are now available. Please feel free to download and print these for your planning purposes, or save these PDFs directly to your computer or school server. ***Even though main NCCSA event dates do not change, please check the latest calendar on the NCCSA website before scheduling your ministry's events.***

The 2014-2015 calendars can be downloaded in PDF format [here](#), or if you wish to download the dates into your Outlook, Google, or Apple calendar, you may do that by clicking "iCal Import" at the bottom of the page [here](#).

Stanford Achievement Testing



Annual achievement testing is one of the best things you can do for your school, teachers, and students. **It is a vital tool in the continual process of assessing the needs of your students and the best approaches to meet those needs.** The NCCSA hopes each school plans to participate in the SAT 10 testing program that the AACS puts together each year to assist member schools.

Scoring costs for 2014 reflect the same lower scoring costs that were negotiated for 2013, and Pearson Education will provide the AACS order forms by the first of January. The NCCSA State Office will email each school when these order forms are available. All member schools will receive an email and a password for accessing the forms. This should significantly streamline the process of receiving your forms. There will not be a mechanism for ordering online, but you will be able to print order forms and return them to Pearson by mail or fax at the date given in the AACS email.

2014 Academic Testing Competition Program



Email sent on 12/02/13—After another successful year of online academic testing in 2013, the **NCCSA State Office is pleased to offer this online format again for the 2014 fine arts competition season. This online testing service is now used by many other state associations.** Several substantial enhancements to the system have been made during the last few months. Much more information will be available in early January. Until then, please view the bullet points below to learn more about this service from the NCCSA and High Ground Solutions.

- This service is branded under the TestPoint™ brand and managed by our technology partner, High Ground Solutions.
- Because some schools may test over a hundred students, instead of a one-week testing period, the NCCSA has set a one-month testing period to give schools plenty of time to schedule testing with the equipment they have onsite.
- **The 2014 testing window is January 20 through February 20.**
- **Registration will take place online from January 10-16, 2014.**
- The sponsoring state association will have access to instantaneous results.
- Tie-breakers will automatically be broken online.
- This method will reduce administrative costs associated with testing registration, test sorting, postage costs of mailing materials, grading, tie-breakers, etc.
- This type of testing is much more convenient and, if marketed correctly, will give a sense of excellence to parents who will be excited about the use of technology.
- Results will be posted online and will be available by school, by 1st-3rd ranking, and by all-students' scores.
- View the Academic Testing Competition Program full-color informational flyer [here](#).

An email with specific instructions will be sent to schools in early January. Feel free to visit the TestPoint™ website at www.testpoint.net, but please do not begin the Order Process yet. Instructions for this process will be sent at a later time.

2013 All-State Music Clinic



Nearly 350 student-musicians descended upon the Raleigh area for the 31st annual NCCSA All-State Music Clinic on November 14-16, 2013.

Students from 18 schools joined together for three days of rehearsals, performances, and fellowship with like-minded musicians.

The band clinicians for the event were as follows: Brent Brondyke, Concert Band; Jennifer Harris, Symphonic Band; and Erik Harris, Honors Band. The All-State Choir rehearsed and performed under the direction of Russ Shelley. After two days of intensive rehearsals, final performances from all three bands and the all-state choir took place at the Binkley Chapel at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest on Saturday, November 16.

Wake Christian Academy and Hilltop Christian School graciously hosted the rehearsals, and Wake Christian served lunch for hundreds of students during the clinic. We are grateful for the hospitality and service of the dedicated staff of these two schools to ensure that this year's rehearsals ran smoothly.

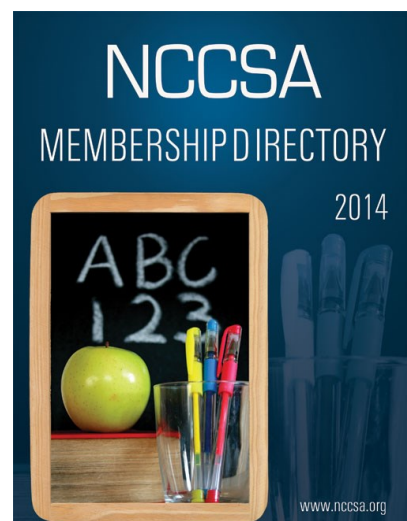
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One of the traditions of this clinic is to present the ***W. Forrest Robertson Jr. Christian Music Leadership Award*** to an Honors Band participant who has been nominated by his school's band director for recognition of leadership and character qualities. Each nominee must have recommendation letters from his pastor or youth pastor, band director, and an academic teacher. Each nominee submitted a personal salvation testimony and must be involved in church and community volunteer ministry. We are very proud of this year's finalists: Emily Butler and Allison Kirby from Greenville Christian Academy, Austin Moody and Krista Smith from Wake Christian Academy, and Leah Reynolds and Noah Russ from Alamance Christian School. Congratulations to Noah Russ from Alamance Christian School for being selected as this year's award recipient.

The NCCSA is extremely grateful for the All-State Music Clinic Leadership Team who helped coordinate and supervise this event: Kevin Elston, Band Chairman; Brent Brondyke, Band Auditions Chairman; Yoshi Nakamura, Assistant Band Chairman; and Josh Baer, Choir Chairman.

A professional photographer was on site for this event, and photographs may be viewed and purchased at www.nccsa.org/programs/fine-arts/all-state-band-clinic/.

The 2014 NCCSA Membership Directories and password to view and/or download these directories have been emailed to each NCCSA school. If you do not have the password, please refer to the "NCCSA Membership Directory" email dated November 6, 2013.



ATHLETIC NEWS



Thanks to all of the schools and students who participated in the recent NCCSA Soccer/Volleyball Tournaments. Special thanks to Sheets Memorial Christian School and Alamance Christian School for hosting the state tournaments.

The NCCSA is grateful for State Athletic Commissioner Bob LaTour and the assistant divisional commissioners who made sure that the soccer/volleyball season and tournaments ran smoothly. Below are the results from the recent State Soccer/Volleyball Tournaments.

Single A

Soccer

- 1st - Bible Baptist
- 2nd - Calvary (King)
- 3rd - Tabernacle (Monroe)

Volleyball

- 1st - Tri-City
- 2nd - Fayetteville Street
- 3rd - Sheets Memorial

Double A

Soccer

- 1st - Wilmington
- 2nd - Wilson
- 3rd - Vandalia

Volleyball

- 1st - Wilmington
- 2nd - Wilson
- 3rd - Gospel Light



CROSS COUNTRY

The 2013 NCCSA Cross Country Meet was held on November 2 at Hagan-Stone Park near Greensboro, North Carolina. This year's state meet included nearly 150 students from 11 different schools. Now in its sixth year, the NCCSA Cross Country program continues to be an exciting part of NCCSA Athletics. The NCCSA would like to thank Mark Weatherford from Vandalia Christian School for his supervision in this sport during the past three years.

The complete results are available online [here](#).

Team Results—Boys

- 1. Wilson Christian Academy
- 2. Alamance Christian School
- 3. Wilmington Christian Academy
- 4. Faith Christian School
- 5. Vandalia Christian School

Team Results—Girls

- 1. Wilson Christian Academy
- 2. Faith Christian School
- 3. Friendship Christian School
- 4. Vandalia Christian School
- 5. Tri-City Christian School

Individual Results—Boys

- 1. Noah Russ, Alamance, 18:21
- 2. Zachary Shirley, Wilson, 18:33
- 3. Micah Woolard, Faith, 20:05
- 4. Lucas Peed, Wilson, 20:07
- 5. Dominic Muscarell, Wilmington, 20:22

Individual Results—Girls

- 1. Ashley Avelino, Faith, 22:17
- 2. Nicole Joyner, Wilson, 22:17
- 3. Hannah Freitag, Tri-City, 22:44
- 4. Katie Glover, Wilson, 22:45
- 5. Caitlyn Barnes, Wilson, 23:07

NCCSA UPDATE

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Joe Haas, Ed.D.—Executive Director
Jason Haas, Ed.S.—Director of Programs/
Services, NCCSA UPDATE Editor

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Spotlight on Tabernacle Christian School—Hickory

In 1970, Tabernacle Christian School began with thirty-six students under the leadership of Dr. Robert Settle, former pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church. Today, students are enrolled in three-year-old kindergarten through grade twelve. The church and school are located on a fourteen-acre campus in the northeast area of Hickory, North Carolina.

Pastor Scott Hooks, the pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church since 2008, serves as the president of the school. James Cordell, a 1983 TCS graduate, has been the principal of the school since 2011. Approximately thirty staff and faculty members serve in the church and school. Tabernacle is a member of the North Carolina Christian School Association as well as the American Association of Christian Schools.

The elementary program utilizes a combination of Bob Jones University Press and A Beka curriculum. The secondary program uses a combination of BJU Press, A Beka, and Saxon Math, using the best of each to create a strong, well-rounded academic program. The school also utilizes the Spell to Write and Read program (SWR)

for three-year old kindergarten through grade twelve. This phonics-based literacy program has been instrumental in raising the students' reading levels, some by several grades. The school has been blessed in recent years with the addition of some technology. Tabernacle has a wireless campus network, two Smart Board interactive whiteboards for both elementary and secondary grades, two portable Sharp Aquos Board interactive display systems, and a new computer lab with sixteen HP computers.

College preparatory classes are encouraged for all students, resulting in a high percentage of graduates going on to higher education, with many going on to Christian colleges. Opportunities are available for students to be counseled in college and career choices. In addition to annual achievement tests, students take the PSAT, ASVAB, ACT, and SAT in high school.

On the secondary level, the athletic department schedules games for boys in soccer and basketball. Sports for girls include volleyball and basketball. The school mascot is the Conqueror, and the school colors are red and black. The school emphasizes a Christ-like

attitude and good sportsmanship along with the development of a competitive skill level. Students in grades three through six enjoy intramural games, competing in soccer, basketball, and volleyball.

Tabernacle's fine arts program includes choir, ensemble, and instrumental private lessons. Music, art, creative writing, and other fine arts are part of student competitions in community, regional, and state contests. Small and large ensembles and choirs develop group and solo skills.

All students have Bible class and chapel throughout the week. As a ministry of Tabernacle Baptist Church, the school uses the Bible to guide student growth and development. To that end, the school has identified ten foundational truths that it hopes to instill in every student. Those truths are love, respect, service, stewardship, holiness, integrity, unity, kindness, thankfulness, and courage. The mission of Tabernacle Christian School is to assist parents in developing the mind of Christ in the lives of students through academic, physical, social, and spiritual training for the glory of God.