

# Individualization: A new definition

Author: Robert R. Newton

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/2435>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),  
Boston College University Libraries.

---

Published in *NASSP Bulletin*, vol. 62, no. 416, pp. 89-92, March 1978

These materials are made available for use in research, teaching and private study, pursuant to U.S. Copyright Law. The user must assume full responsibility for any use of the materials, including but not limited to, infringement of copyright and publication rights of reproduced materials. Any materials used for academic research or otherwise should be fully credited with the source. The publisher or original authors may retain copyright to the materials.

Most popular definitions of individualization are inadequate and misleading, this author feels. He reviews possible definitions and offers his proposal here.

# Individualization: A New Definition

**Robert R. Newton, S.J.**

THERE ARE THREE basic building blocks for definitions of individualization: goals and objectives; program (activities, methods); and pace.

*Goals* and *Objectives* refer to what is to be accomplished by the learning experience, what the student can be expected to do or know or be as a result of the instructional program. *Program* means the activities and strategies which are devised to accomplish these objectives. *Pace* refers to the rate at which the learner moves through the activities to accomplish the objectives. The key question is: To what extent is each of these elements adapted to the individual student?

A second and equally important question is: *Who determines* objectives, programs, and pace? There are two alternatives:

- teacher-determined;
- student-determined.

Though a variety of other elements could be proposed as aspects of individualized programs (e.g., proportion of scheduled to unscheduled time, freedom of movement of students within and outside the school, etc.), for all practical purposes, the various definitions of individualized education can be generated by asking the two questions posed above and combining the variables in different arrangements.

*Robert R. Newton, S.J., is headmaster at Regis High School, New York City.*

The following four descriptions illustrate the basic combinations:

	goals	program	pace
#1	set for class	set for class	adapted to individuals/ subgroups

In this arrangement, the teacher or school sets the objectives for the entire class and prescribes how they will be accomplished (program); but the rate at which the goals are accomplished or the program completed is adjusted to the individual (or subgroups within the class). This adjustment can be made in one of two ways: the teacher determines how fast each student will move; or students are allowed to determine their own pace.

	goals	program	pace
#2	set for class	adapted to individuals/ subgroups	set for class

In this second combination, the goals are set for the entire group but alternative programs, adapted to individuals or subgroups, are provided for the accomplishment of the objectives. All students are expected to accomplish the goals at the same rate even though they may be engaged in different programs to accomplish these goals. Again, the question can be posed: Is the variation in program a decision left to each student or is it prescribed for each student by the teacher?

	goals	program	pace
#3	adapted to individuals/ subgroups	set for individuals/ subgroups	set for class

Arrangement three permits adaptation of objectives to individual students. Once a set of objectives has been selected for (or by) each student, the student follows the program that has been determined for his particular set of objectives. All students are expected to finish at the same time, the student can be permitted to select his set of objectives from a series of possible objectives, or the teacher can prescribe a set of objectives for each student.

	goals	program	pace
#4	adapted to individual/ subgroups	adapted to individual/ subgroups	adapted to individual/ subgroups

In the fourth combination adaptation is made in all three categories. Again, a program could be arranged so that either a student makes the decision concerning the goals, type of program, and rate of accomplishment; or a teacher could devise a program for a student where the teacher prescribes goals, program, and pace for the student.

Several other combinations are possible. For example, in the second arrangement pace as well as program can be adapted to individuals.

### Essential Elements in Defining Individualized Instruction

As mentioned above, popular definitions of individualized instruction tend to absolutize one or another element of individualization and conclude a definition from that element. Most frequently, a program which varies the pace at which individual students progress is held up as *the* model of individualization. From the above descriptions, it should be clear that this and other such partial definitions are both inadequate and misleading. The cause of the confusion is the failure to sort out strategies from ultimate goals or values.

From these descriptions also emerge the elements of a more flexible and inclusive definition of individualization. The first element is *adaptation*. Students differ in their abilities, educational backgrounds, interest in particular disciplines, learning styles, etc. Wherever the educational program takes into consideration any of these differences, to that extent the program is individualized.

The second element is *student responsibility* for learning. The role of the school is to provide a supportive environment which gradually accustoms

the student to learn on his own, to take increasing initiative for making educational decisions suited to his needs, interests, and talents. School should be viewed as a laboratory experience, a practicum which assists the student in learning how to learn. The extent to which schooling enables a student to learn on his own—to determine his own objectives, to select or devise a program to accomplish those objectives, and to achieve his goals at a rate commensurate with his ability and background—to that extent the school has promoted individualized learning.

Both adaptation and student responsibility are flexible values rather than rigid prescriptions or strategies. As such, they can be promoted in a wide variety of learning situations.

### **A New Definition of Individualization**

The definition of individualization that emerges should be obvious. Setting aside rigid descriptions of a particular form of individualization, a program is individualized to the degree:

- that it is *adapted* to the differences among individual students; and
- that it allows or encourages the student to assume *responsibility* for his own learning.

The strategies employed to adapt the program to individual differences or to increase the level of student responsibility are essential but secondary. Planners of individualized programs should ask themselves: to what extent will the proposed program adapt itself to individuals and encourage students to take increasing responsibility for their own education? The criterion for evaluation of the program outcomes is the same: to what extent has there been adaptation and assumption of responsibility?

Thus, the definition of individualization shifts from a set of rigid strategies to a description of flexible values which can assume a variety of forms, dependent on the situation. The ideal, the independent learner, is seldom completely present. However, to the degree to which the dual values or adaptation and student responsibility for learning are pursued or actualized in any learning situation, no matter what the form or outward manifestations, to that degree a program should be judged as individualized. It is an ideal which offers a continual challenge to both student and teacher.