World Class Learners

How to Make Personalization and Student Autonomy Happen

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(Continued)

Spaces" to social and economic considerations of the restaurant and food industry, "Living and Dying in the USA" (a look at end of life issues), robotics, app development, game design, and immersion in the social, political, environmental, and economic life in places ranging from India to Panama. For a list of topics, see the Episcopal Academy 2013–2014 JTerm Course Guide in the Resources section.

o Thanks to strong collaboration between teachers with varied skills sets but overlapping interests, parents who lent their professional expertise, and students who had the freedom to choose any topic they wished, without negative ramifications on grades, college admissions, or other commitments, the two-week JTerm translated into a deep-dive in passion-based learning. As a teacher commented, "When you tell teenagers they have to eat, you know something magical is happening." Another testimony to the power of passion-based learning is the fact that it couldn't be contained within the designated time and space, and a cultural shift at the tradition-based, preK–12 school began. For example, elementary and middle schoolers sometimes served as focus groups, audiences, or product testers, and they in turn began to discuss their own passions to pursue when they get to participate in JTerm; teachers were percolating about how they can inject other passions and cross-disciplinary topics in their general class time; and students considering life after high school began to open up to new possibilities for their own futures, having a better sense of their own strengths and interests.

- *Dedicate one "specials" class, if possible.* Lou Lahana is the middle school "techbrarian" (technology/library science specialist) at the Island School, P.S. 188, in Lower Manhattan, New York. His inquiry-based, trial-and-error experience and passion for social justice share many similarities with Matt Cone's. At the start of his attempting to connect with what mattered to students, Lou introduced them to a variety of technologies in the media center, and students worked on them for the sake of learning the various tools. But as he observed students' curiosity and desire to apply their learning, Lou began to find ways for the technology to be of service to students developing their passions around larger local and global challenges, rather than have the technology as the focal point of the class.

○ "Core" classes at the school don't offer much leeway in terms of personalized learning, so Lou makes the most of the two classes per cycle students spend with him. A key learning for him has been to loosen his control of the class: He removed the word "assignment" in favor of a series of possibilities and prompts. He then removed the rigid chronological lesson planning and instead exposed students to problems and had them choose one and create solutions or products to address it. Through careful research and planning, Lou honed his own job down to 3 minutes every morning to expose students to a particular issue. If it turns out that the issue is a student's interest, Lou has more in-depth information available on his class website (techbrarian.com; see the "Problems" tab) that would in turn serve as a basis for something the students would need to produce and dive into more deeply. Lahana evolved into a curator of resources. He found technology tools and content that aligned with students' passions and interests. As products began to roll in, a whole different dynamic around learning, motivation, identity, and confidence was created. Even evaluation altered to reflect this new way of working. On the bottom of the techbrarian.com "Problems" page, you'll see five questions (e.g., "Why are the solutions already out there not good enough?"). If students can answer these questions, backed up by experience and research on their particular issue, then they demonstrate their learning.