Personal Learning at Mission Vista High School

March 2022
“A progressively student-driven model of education that empowers students to pursue aspirations, investigate problems, design solutions, chase curiosities, and create performances.”

— Mission Vista High School’s shared definition of personal learning (PL)
Jeremy, who was an assistant principal at MVHS at the time, recalls, “We had the expectation that teachers would try to incorporate tenets of PL like student voice, co-creation of learning, and self-discovery, but we were shocked to find that not only did it happen in every classroom, but over 70 percent of the staff redesigned an entire project or unit. Some even devoted their entire content curriculum for that term to personalizing learning for their students. So it was a massive victory, and [then-principal Nicole Allard] did a wonderful job helping staff celebrate that win and understand what an achievement that was.” Ever since, he says, “PL has been a cornerstone of our identity.”

What follows are the stories of four MVHS “cannon-ballers,” educators who are supporting the transformation by modeling their learning, sharing their practices, and inspiring others to rise to the PL Challenge.

Jeremy Walden
Principal, MVHS

As described in Reaching for the Personal Learning Star at Vista Unified, personalization of learning is occurring throughout Vista Unified School District (VUSD) as part of the district-wide PL Challenge. However, individual schools like Mission Vista High School (MVHS) are empowered to shape that change and create a pathway to personal learning as a community. According to Jeremy Walden, principal of MVHS, the faculty and staff have been on a six-year journey together to transform learning so that, “students are given opportunity to have a voice in their learning, co-create learning opportunities with their teachers, work with peers to co-construct learning and understanding, and ultimately, are encouraged to self-direct their learning paths.”

In some ways, Jeremy observes, PL was a “natural fit” for MVHS and “an easy pitch to our team. Personal learning fits well with our school because of the unique pathways we offer in Arts & Communication and Science & Technology. There was a ton of coursework in which students could explore their strengths, interests, and values. There were good things happening already.”

However, MVHS embraces VUSD’s commitment to inclusive change practices, fostering a culture of innovation, and having teachers start where they are. To illustrate, Jeremy tells the story of how MVHS’s Wildly Important Goal (WIG) for 2018-2019 unfolded. The school goal, co-created by teachers and school leaders, called for all educators to offer students at least one personalized learning experience in each course by the end of that school year. Teachers were empowered to determine how—and how deeply—to engage with the school’s WIG, from “dipping their toes” into PL with incremental changes to an individual lesson or two to implementing PL in more sustained and significant ways.

Listen to the Podcast
Listen to learners talk about their pathways at MVHS

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As a department, Michelle and the other English teachers are supporting student ownership by helping students see the work they do and the feedback they receive as evidence of progress toward goals for each course. In the English department, she observes, “Feedback has always been a big part of what we do.” However, new areas of focus include placing greater value on feedback than on grades and promoting “ownership of data as a tool for students to measure their own growth.” The first step, she says, was to create course goals as a team, by looking at standards and asking, “What is it that

According to Michelle, teaching both ninth graders and seniors allows her to perceive learners’ progression over four years, so that she and fellow English teachers “can continually support them to be more independent with their learning and have more ownership over it.” In her own practice, Michelle began by supporting learners to set their own goals and by providing them with more choices about what, when, and how they learn, including choosing their own writing and speaking topics and making decisions about the kind of feedback they receive.

In her ninth grade class, for example, learners were tasked with hosting a 45-minute literature-circle talk on a book of their choice from the Advanced Placement list. Learners set up their own reading schedules and topics for discussion, and they also took the lead in designing the assessment for the project. Michelle describes the process as starting with broad questions like, “What should our discussions of the book look like? How would we evaluate them?” Teams of students then came up with descriptions, which Michelle synthesized into a draft rubric. “I had the students review it and give feedback. In this way, students were able to co-create their evaluation.”

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For Michelle Daum, the phrase from MVHS’s definition of personal learning that resonates the most is “progressively student-driven.” As chair of the English department and a teacher on special assignment, she supports colleagues in achieving their individual goals to promote personal learning. “Our end goal,” she says, “is that our students are self-directed and prepared for their futures beyond our four walls.”

She explains, “Our purpose as a staff is to empower students to be self-directed, creative, and critical thinkers who persevere to positively impact our interconnected world. Within our [English] courses, we want to move students toward that independence and that ownership so that they’re prepared to make their own decisions and see themselves within our content. To know who they are as readers, as writers, as speakers, as listeners.”

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See this lit-circle discussion rubric Michelle’s class co-created

Explore this peer evaluation form learners use for self-reflection, peer assessment, and goal setting for discussions

See a sample set of “I Can” statements for speaking and listening
we’re hoping students will be able to do by the end of this course?” The English teachers next wrote out the course goals as ‘I can’ statements for students. From there, learners set personal goals for the course that aligned with course goals, standards, and individual needs.

“We then provided students with opportunities to practice. We took their work and provided feedback on the moves they’re making in their writing, their reading, their speaking, and listening.” Based on that practice, Michelle explains, students can reflect on where they are at the beginning, set specific goals for themselves, and then measure how they are making progress as they work through the course.

According to Michelle, this learner-driven goal work culminates in inviting students to reflect on their learning journey in writing and provide evidence of growth toward their course goals. Specifically, learners in Michelle’s Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC) write a letter that functions as an argumentative essay to propose and justify their semester grade in the course. The essay also provides opportunities for learners to self-assess more broadly, such as by describing their work habits, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as how learners addressed any obstacles or circumstances that complicated their learning progress.

“During the start of your class, I was fairly confident in my skills in reading and writing. This class helped me realize that there was much more room for growth in these skills, and that my idea of good reading and writing was a lot simpler than what the skill entails. I also entered your class believing that there was no way I could greatly improve my speaking and listening skills, that they would just remain stagnant. My growth is a testament that that initial belief is wrong. I believe the grade that well reflects my habits and skills in your class is an A, proven by my consistent grades in writing, my change in how I read texts, and my improvement in my listening and speaking skills.” - EC

“My learning journey began with slight confidence, but it also began with intuition and a spark of interest in English. The prompts and assignments given in reading, writing, and listening and speaking all covered engaging topics which allowed creativity to take place. This creativity carved a path for growth and the development of skills for me to be deserving of an A in this class. I believe an A is deserving because I know my skills, and I know ‘I CAN’ have a 3 in reading, a 4 in writing, and a 4 in listening and speaking. These numbers represent my power of words, my ability to engage in meaningful conversations, and comprehending intense literature.” - KD

“I genuinely feel that during my time in this class I have been able to learn and develop so many important skills that I will be able to carry with me throughout the rest of my life, not just in my schooling.” - JC

Learn More

Read the grade proposal assignment description for Michelle’s ERWC classes.
Robert Chodola, who also teaches MVHS’s senior capstone class, My Vision Personalized (MVP), and a course devoted to the college application process, is forthright about the difference between personalizing an elective and applying PL principles to a subject area like history. The electives, he says, can be “more personalized and focus on soft skills and real-world skills because they have less curricular structure.”

The College Application Seminar, he says, “is 99 percent personalized simply because every single thing they face funnels through the learner and their needs for their college journey.” With an emphasis on “making sure they understand who they are,” students embark on a personalized path that includes personality tests like the RIASEC assessment and frequent personal reflections, as well as research into careers and college majors.

“Do a lot of work to establish the importance of knowing your skills, your personality, your identity at the beginning,” Robert explains. “They start to build a language for talking about their soft skills and their strengths and their interests and their values. And then they start to make choices about what sort of careers they see as potential. So that before we ever get to applications, they have an array of colleges they think might fit with their major, which might fit with their career.”

In contrast to these learner-centered electives, Robert acknowledges that content-focused courses—especially Advanced Placement (AP) history courses—have been more of a “struggle” to personalize. Even so, Robert has found ways to implement PL by adopting a skills-based approach to his subject area, providing opportunities for learner choice and ownership of success, and by exploring historical concepts through the lens of current and relevant issues.

Leveraging five key standards from the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG), learners in Robert’s class use primary source documents to learn how to read and think like a historian. Students develop skills like close reading, examining context, and seeking out reliable corroboration from other sources. He explains that students are “not just reading the textbook like a history student or reading Wikipedia like a history buff or reading analytical paragraphs like a history teacher, but are using the skills that actual historians and fact checkers need to use to understand, based on reliable sources, how we construct the past.” Because such skills can be applied to multiple contexts, Robert is able to provide more choices and flexible options for students to demonstrate their learning. According to him, students practice using primary sources each day “in a low stakes environment.” The assessments, then, are about “demonstrating how well you understand these skills in a slightly more formal setting,” he says.
For the assessment, he explains, “They choose sources that perhaps resonated most with them when we did them in class” and then annotate, close read, and analyze them, examining the author’s background and potential biases and explaining how specific quotations support the author’s claim or belief. Learners also select another primary source that explores the same thematic issues. “Students choose the lens of corroboration and then explain how those sources support and complicate each other as well.” In keeping with Robert’s approach to grading, he adds that, “Any of the assessments they do, I give them feedback. Then they can resubmit it, and I’ll regrade it and give them the score if they improve.”

Robert also makes learning about history personally relevant to students by examining historical events through the lens of what is currently happening in the world learners know. “For the last couple of years, because of COVID, I completely reframed how we study the Great Depression, the New Deal, and World War II,” he says. “I reframed all the essential questions to be focused on ‘How does society and how does the government respond during a national crisis?’ I tried to bring in that sense of the real world. We’re living through a crisis right now, whether we want to or not, and we can take these exact same questions, decontextualize them from what happened nearly a hundred years ago. With that framing in mind, they could see how the world around them is governed by the same principles as what we look at in the past.”
Will Salley, who teaches photography at MVHS, considers himself lucky to have the autonomy to experiment and, as he says, “do whatever I want to do and choose how I go about delivering instruction, as long as it falls within the standards.” He has always considered his teaching to be somewhat personalized, in part because his subject area lends itself well to applying artistic concepts to unique, individual work products. As he explains, “If the assignment is the rule of thirds, they’re going to take pictures and everybody’s going to do it in a different way, deciding where they shoot and how they choose to shoot it, within the parameters.”

What first resonated for Will with respect to PL was thinking about ownership of learning as a “fluid and flexible” continuum. “Certain projects are going to be more teacher based and sometimes it’s going to be more student based.” However, after MVHS joined the district’s PL Challenge, he says, “The seeds were planted, and over time I started to look at what I could do to make learning more co-creative.”

Will now sees himself as more of a “cannon-baller” for personal learning, and he has shifted his instruction closer to the student agency side of the spectrum in intentional ways. Specifically, he now invites students to help design and set up the parameters and success criteria for their assignments. To illustrate, he describes a midterm project that he co-created with learners using words from the MVHS mission statement—discovery, innovation, and growth (DIG)—to guide the design process. Using reflections and brainstorming, Will focused first on discovery by having students generate ideas about what they had learned and discovered in the course so far—what had resonated and what projects and techniques they had liked. He next challenged the class to innovate by asking, “What could we do that would take some of those ideas that we just learned and then put them together in a new and different way?” For example, he says, “They might take a composition technique and a lighting technique and a concept and put them together to create something new.”

For Will, the most pronounced shift in his practice addresses the role of learners in demonstrating their growth. In response to virtual learning and other challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, learners organize their thinking and planning by creating origami-style graphic organizers. This heart-shaped origami supports students to use the discovery-innovation-growth (DIG) process to design a project.
Creative work in Will's class is always personal. Here's a collection of student work. The assignments allow for each student to shine and bring their own unique perspectives to the work. See back cover for student photo credit and background information.
pandemic, he wrestled with the question, “What is going to demonstrate that they understand the core concepts of things, the core standards, but without having to be so focused on whether they checked all the boxes?” The answer to the growth part of DIG, he decided, was allowing learners to set and propose in advance the expectations about how many techniques or how many different locations they would use, or how many pictures they would turn in.

“Some of them were going to take 500 pictures because they’re doing a music video,” he recalls. “And if they said they were going to turn in five photos, but it’s going to demonstrate all of the core parameters, then that was okay. They were allowed to personalize that and decide what it was going to be for them, as long as they could show that they took what they’d already learned, that they’d used it in a new way, and that they’d improved.”

In addition to co-designing the assignment and setting their parameters for the project, students also helped create a rubric that articulated the criteria for success. According to Will, looking at the rubric was a key part of each learner’s self-reflection at the end of the assignment. “I put it on them,” he says, “and asked them, ‘What’s your grade going to be on this project? Here’s the rubric you created.’ And if they gave themselves a four out of five, I would look at the rubric and ask them for elements of support.”

“It’s that co-creation part,” that’s so powerful, he observes, “Giving them ownership and buy-in because, you know, they created it. It’s not top down.”

When I first thought about personalized learning and letting the students direct some of the work, it seemed like we were going to lose rigor or depth of knowledge. And that, because the students are generating some of this, it’s easier for the teacher. But it’s actually more work for the teacher because you have to have thought about all the contingencies and possibilities, all the things that might come up.

You’ve got a general idea or standard like “narrative,” but how are we going to go about doing that? How am I going to open the idea up to them? Well, I might ask, “What kind of stories or movies do you like?” or “What are some childhood memories?” and we’ll do a brainstorm to come up with four or five ideas in all these different ways. And so then, when I say, “Okay, now pick one of these that you might be able to use as a narrative about growing up,” we’ve already come up with the ideas of what they might be able to go out and shoot. I’ve already thought about all these possibilities. You’re still leading the horse to the water, right?

So it’s not easier by any means. It is harder, but the amount of buy-in that you get from the students when it’s their idea way outweighs the hard work. They’re engaged, they’re motivated to do stuff, and they’re jazzed. They’re going, and then it’s about letting them do their work and guiding them.”

— Will Salley, Photography Teacher, MVHS
Colleagues invariably point to math teacher and department chair, Stacy Eyton, as the premier PL “cannon-baller” at MVHS. For example, Nicole Allard, who was the principal of MVHS before serving as VUSD’s executive director of educational excellence and innovation, often tells the story of how Stacy dove into the deep end of the PL Challenge. Instead of meeting the school-wide goal by revising a lesson or unit, Nicole recalls, Stacy came to Nicole’s office and simply announced that she was going to redesign and test a completely new way of grading, one that relied more on feedback and reflection than on numerical scores.

Instead of assigning points to tasks and having a computer calculate an average, Stacy explains, she began incorporating extensive written and verbal feedback, learner self-assessment, and regular student-teacher conferences. “Students don’t just see points adding up, like, ‘I got 3 out of 10.’ Even if they get a problem wrong, they and I can see exactly where they are having trouble,” Stacy explains. Providing feedback rather than a numerical score, she argues, “deters students from playing the grading game,” supporting them to focus on learning and improvement.

For Stacy and her colleagues, learner reflection is a key part of the PL approach to learning math. For example, after students complete an assessment, they
“reflect on the mistakes they made. Is this a huge mistake like you’re not calculating correctly, or is it a minor mathematical mistake but they have the right idea? Reflection helps them realize where they are and helps us realize how we can help and how we can move past this barrier.”

Like many educators at MVHS, math teachers have developed student-friendly versions of essential math skills and concepts, like graphing a line or writing equations of a line. In addition to reflecting on their performance on individual tasks, learners are invited to reflect more broadly on their level of understanding of these key concepts. According to Stacy, she and her fellow math teachers “try to get [students] to reflect on individual concepts to see how we can push them forward, what we can do as well as what they can do,” whether it’s a learner signaling that they are ready to move on or telling the teacher, “I’m a deer in the headlights. Help me out!” In Stacy’s experience, “students are very strong at self-assessing.”

Although Stacy indicates that COVID-19 and the resulting learning loss have required them to scale back on some interest-based extension projects, she and the other math teachers are still committed to key PL principles. “We want students to take ownership of math and find areas that are of interest to them—how they can apply it to what they are interested in and extend [math] into that versus ‘Here’s what you need to know. Let me just give it to you.’”

Another approach to making math relevant and accessible to all learners involves changing mindsets about what the subject is all about. “Math is not just ‘solve for x.’ It is about problem-solving and tackling challenges,” Stacy explains, citing broadly applicable skills like reasoning, investigating patterns, and communicating with precision that can be developed in a math course.

“Our department goal,” she observes, “states that ‘math is a journey to navigate with GPS—grit, perseverance, and self-motivation.’ Yes, we are doing math together, but what we are learning about is not giving up.” Given the challenges posed by the pandemic, these are inspirational words for adults and learners alike.

Learn More
See these student-facing skills and standards lists:

- Financial Algebra
- Integrated Math 2

In tandem with the personal learning provided in classroom instruction and assessment, the math program at MVHS offers learners multiple pathways through the math curriculum. In addition to the traditional route to AP-level courses—what Stacy calls “the road to calculus”—learners can take alternative pathways based on their interests and goals. For example, Stacy points to financial algebra, an applied mathematics course that focuses on personal finance, and discrete math, which includes topics like game theory that “kids have a lot of fun with.” If learners take data science in their junior year, they can choose AP statistics as seniors. In this way, Stacy says, “they can still take a rigorous AP class without having to take pre-calculus.”
Pages 14-15 Student Photo Credit, from top left:
Top Row 1. Skyler Haynes. Fashion Photography was the area of interest for Skyler in the Careers in Photography project. Her “client” was the school’s Fashion Club. She chose to do the photo shoot in the studio and feature the club members in their best school fashion.

2+3. Natalia Salazar. One of the PL projects that the Photo 1 class completes is the Famous Photographer project. Natalia chose Edward Steichen as her favorite photographer. After researching her photographer’s images to analyze his techniques and style, she produced the first series of images as self portraits using Steichen’s soft light, classical turn of the century styling and sepia toned images. After a class presentation and feedback she did a second shoot attempting to push the concepts and make it her own style. She chose to take portraits of her brothers playing with the camera angles to be more confrontational, but keeping the old styling and sepia toning.

4. Wyatt Butler. The narrative project is the first PL project in the Photo 1 class. Students use origami to help brainstorm prior knowledge (both about possible stories to convey, and camera techniques they just learned). Wyatt chose to tell a story about a garage band, using slow shutter speed to paint with light to help convey the energy of the music they were creating.

Bottom Row 1. Natalia Estudillo. The Photo 2 class had been learning a lot of new Photoshop selection techniques. For the midterm the students did a narrative project that used multiple images to montage in Photoshop Illustration. Natalia chose to tell the story of Little Red Riding Hood, featuring her sister in the classic red cape.

2. Ruben Avalos. This portrait was produced for the DIY background project. Students brought in items that could be used as a background for the photoshoot. It also incorporated open shade lighting to create soft light, and then was edited in the style of Annie Leibovitz which we were studying that week.

3. Crystal Hernandez. Rock the Hill is the largest event on campus. Photography students take band portraits for all of the performers prior to going on stage.

4. Kali Stewart & 5. Richmond Tangalan. Theater Headshots are produced by the Photo 2 class for all of the drama performances. It gives the students a chance to practice working with and directing a model with a very short time frame. The students retouch and print all of the images to hang in the foyer of the theater during the performances.