Machines can't 'personalize' education, only people can

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In the past year, COVID-19 abruptly disrupted schooling, and forced the question of how much kindergarten to Grade 12 education should or will rely on online teaching in the near and distant future. Education has

taken a decided technological turn in its massive adaptation to online learning. This is precipitating a critical debate in education right now, with a most uncertain future and much depending on its outcome.

One key concern when considering both online learning and the tech platforms teachers may rely on in classrooms is a long-standing issue of how education should accommodate student individuality. For at least 150 years, education in the western world has been conflicted over this issue.

Education advocates like homeschooling champion Charlotte Mason and education reformer John Dewey advocated for recognition of students as unique persons whose interests and backgrounds shaped them in particular ways. Writing in 1897, Dewey argued it was critical for educators to note and consider students' unique qualities when designing curriculum.

Mason's and Dewey's philosophies and the schooling approaches they advocated helped spur educational debates about the meaning of "personalized learning." These also pitted them against others like scientific management guru Frederick Taylor who argued for mass standardization in education.

This conflict remains central to education debates unfolding today. For example, while some proponents of remote learning argue teachers can still offer personalized learning online, there are also industries focused on the notion that AI can also "personalize" student experiences. But machines aren't persons.

Emerging research shows wide variability in student experiences across technology-based approaches and platforms. Even when particular teachers' are successful in delivering remote learning with students' personal and holistic interests in mind, they are working in an

educational context with increased marketing, uptake and profiting from educational technologies.

Specific tech "solutions" like buying particular software for schools are often "Taylorist" insofar as the school or classroom is now committed to particular way of interacting and learning. In some cases school communities come to complain that personal contact has been replaced with computerization.

Technology surely has a role in education, but determining what it will be, and whose interests it will really serve, is a critical public debate. To this end, here are three thinkers who can help guide parents, educators and administrators in considering how education can adapt to changing technological circumstances while centering students as people and fostering caring human communities.

1. Nel Noddings

In her ground-breaking book, *Caring*, educational ethicist Nel Noddings describes the importance of seeing and "confirming" students as persons. Noddings says such "confirmation" elicits a practice of dialogue in which educators "see and receive the other" as they really are, as a teaching and moral responsibility.

I believe that truly "seeing" and acknowledging students is a feasible response in videoconferencing environments like Zoom and should be recognized as a best practice. The same is also true for how educators direct students to apps that enable students to pursue learning activities reflecting personal choices: for example, platforms like DIY.org, Khan Academy, YouTube and others. Teachers can can and should validate students' particular interests as they engage these sources.

2. Iain McGilchrist

In a recent text, "Ways of attending: How our divided brain constructs the world," Scottish neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist asserts that technological thinking and compartmentalization have come to dominate human thinking.

This is thinking rooted in the brain's left hemisphere and exemplified by mathematical reasoning and rationalization. He says the brain's right hemisphere, responsible for whole-person, big-picture thinking, and moral decision-making, plays a secondary role. McGilchrist contends that new digital technologies driven by machine logic are effectively hijacking human attention, forcing us to become more machine-like.

McGilchrist advises everyone to study how we are interacting with technology to better understand how technology is influencing behaviours, including how it distracts us and channels our attention. If we don't better perceive this, he warns, we risk becoming increasingly alienated from the feelings and moral decision-making that define our humanity.

3. Ursula Franklin

Scientist, acclaimed humanitarian and pacifist Ursula Franklin described in her 1989 Massey Lecture series and book, "The Real World of Technology" how the Industrial Revolution set in motion technological processes, like assembly lines, that ushered in sweeping societal changes.

She characterized such processes as "prescriptive" in how they engineered human behaviour through compliance and conditioning, resulting in an "enormous social mortgage." Franklin contrasts prescriptive technologies with "holistic" technologies that are controlled

by an individual user, like personal craftsmanship.

To Franklin, holistic technologies enable people to enact caring gestures, and are spontaneous and flexible, where prescriptive technologies are rigid and mechanistic. Franklin's philosophy points to the idea that we should recognize the limits and power of technology.

Franklin's insights should lead us to remember that while collaboration amongst students can be enhanced in technological environments, some education researchers also caution that technological tools themselves don't create holistic, inclusive or creative communities. Only humans can do this.

Serving people

The insights of Noddings, McGilchrist, Franklin and others urge us to deeply consider the technologies we choose to use in our schools and what role they play. This does not mean that we reject the integration of technology into education. I believe many educators have demonstrated it is possible to strike a healthy balance when integrating technology with educational goals.

But future educational paths will reflect choices we make now. In facing today's unprecedented challenges, educators and school administrators must continue to support education as an endeavour that holds at its core the mission of serving all people.

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