

Chapter 2

A Vision for Deeper Agency and Personalization in Micro–Credentials

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ABSTRACT

Current systems of education, both K12 and postsecondary, are leaving learners unprepared for the future of work. Standardized, compliance-oriented approaches to teaching and learning are inequitable and are not responsive enough to meet individual learner needs. A learner-centered educational paradigm has emerged which seeks to disrupt traditional models of education by centering the individual needs of learners in all learning experiences. At the same time, the alternative educational model of micro-credentialing holds great promise to improve workforce readiness. While the fields of learner-centered education and micro-credentials are simultaneously gaining traction, their possible intersections have yet to be fully explored. Micro-credentials have the potential to ready learners for the future of work while providing a deeply relevant, learner-centered experience. This chapter lays out a vision for exactly what this might look like and why it matters for learners.

INTRODUCTION

Current systems of education, both K12 and postsecondary, are contributing to a confluence of conditions which are leaving learners unprepared for the future of work (Achieve, 2014). Standardized approaches to teaching and learning are not responsive enough to meet individual learner needs and overemphasize traditional academics at the expense of other essential skills. This occurs within learning environments that are heavily compliance-oriented, producing learners who are dependent on external guidance, rather than empowered and self-directed. While pockets of innovation exist, these characteristics are systemic, pervasive, and highly inequitable. In response to these issues, a learner-centered educational paradigm has emerged, championed by organizations such as Education Reimagined and the Aurora Institute. A learner-centered approach seeks to disrupt standardized, compliance-oriented education by placing the

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individual needs, assets, and interests of learners at the center of all educational experiences. At the same time, alternative models of education focused on preparing learners for the rapidly changing world of work are gaining traction (Rossiter & Tynan, 2019). One such model is the micro-credential: a short, inexpensive course or learning experience targeting the development of a particular competency. While learner-centered education and micro-credentials have each been gaining acceptance simultaneously, their potential intersections have yet to be fully explored. With the application of intentional design criteria, micro-credentials have the potential to ready learners for the future of work while providing a deeply relevant, learner-centered experience.

The Problem with Standardization

American educational institutions adhere to a system which, in an effort to maximize efficiency, has sought to standardize nearly every aspect of teaching and learning. Standardization in education is framed around providing a common sequence of curriculum, instruction, and assessments, over a predetermined amount of time, thereby offering a uniform experience to all learners.

In K-12 education, this looks like grouping students by age and then moving them lockstep through grade levels, providing instruction around a common set of academic standards and administering standardized assessments to evaluate the performance of all stakeholders involved (student, teacher, school, district, state, nation). In higher education, this looks like grouping students by degree program and moving them lockstep through a series of courses over a specified amount of time, providing learners with a common experience as defined by course syllabi.

This approach to education came about in the early 1900s alongside the rise of scientific management or “Taylorism” in the workplace. Named after its originator, Frederick Winslow Taylor, “Taylorism” is an approach which prizes efficiency above all else. Taylor once stated “An organization composed of individuals of mediocre ability, working in accordance with policies, plans, and procedures... will in the long run prove more successful and stable than an organization of geniuses each led by inspiration” (Taylor Society, 1929, p. 28). With this mindset, Taylor sought to find the “one best way” to accomplish every task, achieved by using a stopwatch to identify the average time each method took to complete and selecting the fastest one. He would then standardize that process, and train workers to follow it, an approach still often adhered to in business today (Taylor, 1911, p. 25). The factories of the time had an immense need for workers to carry out these standardized processes, and in response, the American public education system was overhauled “to conform to the central tenet of scientific management: standardize everything around the average” (Rose, 2017, p. 51). This led to what is commonly referred to as the “factory model” of American education, a system “designed to serve the Average Student and create Average Workers” (Rose, 2017, p. 52).

One of the biggest problems with this approach is that the “Average Student”, as conceptualized by the standardized approach to education, does not exist and therefore should not be used to inform educational decision making. The concept of the “Average Student” is dismantled by the notion that humans are “jagged” (Rose, 2017, p. 82), or multidimensional. Todd Rose’s “jaggedness principle” asserts that “...we cannot apply one-dimensional thinking to understand something that is complex and ‘jagged’”, and humans are “jagged” on “almost every...characteristic that we care about - including talent, intelligence, character, creativity, and so on” (Rose, 2017, p. 82).

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