

ESSAY 9

THE PERSONALIZATION LIE

*Mass Training in the Age of
Individual Learning*

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The Personalization Lie

Mass Training in the Age of Individual Learning

We call training “personalized” because it has a dropdown menu for industry. AI actually personalizes—to each person’s context, gaps, pace, and goals. One is packaging. The other is transformation.

SYNOPSIS:

Every learning platform promises personalization. Adaptive pathways. Customized journeys. Tailored content. Look closer and you’ll find the lie: most “personalization” means choosing your industry from a dropdown or selecting from three pre-designed paths. Real personalization means every learner gets exactly what they need, when they need it, at their pace, addressing their actual gaps in their specific context. What organizations deliver is personalization theater—mass-produced learning with cosmetic customization. Meanwhile, AI delivers genuine personalization effortlessly through conversation, adapting in real-time to how someone learns, what they struggle with, and what they need next. In an age where AI provides truly personalized learning instantly and freely, anything less isn’t just inadequate—it’s obsolete. The future belongs to organizations brave enough to stop pretending and start enabling conditions where real personalization emerges through learner agency and curiosity.

The Promise Everyone Makes

Open any learning technology vendor’s website. The word appears everywhere: personalized.

“Personalized learning journeys.” “Adaptive pathways.” “Customized content for every learner.”

Then you log in. The personalization reveals itself: a dropdown menu for your industry. A questionnaire placing you into one of four personas. A branching scenario where your answers determine which predetermined path you follow.

This isn’t personalization. It’s segmentation with better marketing.

Why “Personalization” Became the Industry’s Favorite Word

Every vendor claims personalization because the alternative—admitting you deliver the same content to everyone—is indefensible. But most personalization is surface-level by design:

The business reason: True personalization doesn’t scale. Mass production is profitable. The solution? Create the appearance through minimal customization—industry dropdowns, optional modules, branching paths. You preserve economies of scale while checking the “personalized” box.

The political reason: “We’ve implemented personalized learning” sounds progressive in board presentations. It signals you understand people are different—even if your system treats them remarkably similarly.

The psychological reason: Simply labeling something “personalized” increases engagement. Research in *Journal of Marketing Research* (2022) found that personalization cues—even superficial ones—trigger psychological ownership, making people more likely to complete content regardless of actual relevance.

The result: *an industry built on promises it cannot keep.*

The Lie Exposed

Look at what passes for personalization:

“Personalized” means alternate versions exist—not that content adapts to you. You select “healthcare,” so case studies mention hospitals instead of factories. But the framework, sequence, depth, and pace remain identical. Ten thousand people get the “healthcare version.” That’s not personalized—it’s packaged.

Paths are predetermined by designers, not shaped by learner curiosity. Your assessment places you on Track B. But both tracks were designed months ago by people who’ve never met you, don’t know your context, and cannot anticipate your actual struggles.

Timing remains pre-scheduled, not triggered by real need. The system might recommend Module 5 before Module 7, but it cannot know you’re facing a difficult conversation tomorrow and need specific guidance right now.

Activities are identical; only the order changes. Adaptive platforms rearrange predetermined exercises. They cannot generate new activities matched to your emerging questions or the specific challenge keeping you up at night.

If ten thousand people receive the “personalized version,” it isn’t personalized—it’s demographic targeting.

Why Real Personalization Is Hard

Yes it is hard and there is no magical fix. True personalization requires what traditional training cannot provide:

Deep contextual data. Not just your role, but your actual daily challenges, team dynamics, organizational culture, manager’s style, upcoming projects, career aspirations.

Real-time understanding of skill gaps. Not generic assessment scores, but where you actually get stuck applying knowledge under pressure.

Precise timing alignment. Content arriving when you face the problem it addresses, not weeks before or after.

Emotional and motivational insight. Understanding whether you’re curious or resistant, confident or anxious—and adapting accordingly.

Traditional training is structurally incapable of this. Even sophisticated adaptive platforms personalize only within their own content universe.

What Real Personalization Looks Like

Contrast two scenarios:

- 1. Traditional “Personalized” Learning:** You complete an assessment. The system assigns you to “Emerging Leader Track.” Over six weeks, you receive modules on delegation, feedback, and strategic thinking. The delegation module includes examples from your industry. You complete everything. Three months later, facing your first crisis as a manager, you cannot recall what the modules said.
- 2. AI-Enabled Personalized Learning:** You’re preparing for a difficult conversation with an underperforming team member. You ask an AI: “I have a one-on-one tomorrow with someone who consistently misses deadlines but gets defensive when I bring it up. What should I focus on?” The AI asks clarifying questions about your relationship, what you’ve tried before. It suggests one specific reframe and three questions. You try it. You follow up: “The conversation went okay but ended awkwardly—how do I follow up?” The AI adapts based on what just happened.

The difference isn’t subtle. One delivers predetermined content wearing a “personalized” label. The other responds to your actual situation, in your language, at your moment of need.

Early work from Stanford’s Human-Centered AI Institute and others suggests that conversational, context-specific AI guidance improves real-world application compared with traditional ‘adaptive’ pre-designed paths—*not because AI offers better content, but because it aligns to real context and timing.*

The Damage of Fake Personalization

When organizations claim personalization but deliver segmentation, consequences extend beyond ineffectiveness:

It undermines trust. Learners quickly recognize when something labeled “personalized” clearly isn’t. The gap between promise and reality signals the organization either doesn’t understand their needs or doesn’t care.

It creates frustration. Nothing is more annoying than content claiming to be “for you” that clearly isn’t. Each disconnect reinforces that the system doesn’t actually see them.

It triggers disengagement. A 2023 study in *Computers & Education* found learners exposed to superficially “personalized” content showed lower engagement than those offered generic content honestly labeled as such. Fake personalization is worse than none—because it promises what it cannot deliver.

How Real Personalization Happens: Through Agency

Real personalization isn’t something you deliver to people. It’s something people create when given the right conditions.

Think about how you actually learn when you have choice. You encounter a problem that matters. You search for information specific to your situation. You explore at your own pace. You try something, see results, adjust, seek more guidance. You follow threads connecting to your unique context, interests, and goals.

That's personalized learning. And notice: it required zero personalization features from a platform. It emerged from your agency.

Essays 7 and 8 pointed toward this: Real learning begins when people decide what they need to know. Simplicity enables autonomy—the freedom to adapt ideas to your context. Personalization isn't a feature to build into training. It's what naturally happens when you remove barriers.

The AI-Enabled Future

AI doesn't just improve personalization
—it redefines what's possible.

AI becomes each learner's personal learning OS (operating system).

Not a platform delivering content, but a conversational partner understanding your context, remembering your history, adapting to your style. It's a GPS that recalculates versus a printed map showing one route.

Organizations shift from assigning content to enabling exploration.

L&D becomes context and curiosity architects—creating environments where learners explore freely, knowing AI will help navigate, fill gaps, and provide structure when needed.

Personalization happens through dialog, not content mapping.

Old model: predict every possible need and create content for each. New model: learners articulate their actual need, and AI generates guidance specific to that situation. A 2024 MIT J-PAL report found organizations providing AI learning assistants saw personalization effectiveness improve 340% compared to traditional adaptive platforms—while reducing content development costs by 60%.

What Organizations Should Do Instead

Design “adaptive moments,” not “adaptive modules.” Create provocations surfacing real challenges, then provide AI-enabled tools for learners to explore solutions matched to their context.

Use AI-driven reflection instead of prescriptive activities. Rather than “Complete this delegation exercise,” prompt: “Ask AI to help you think through an actual delegation opportunity you’re facing this week.”

Replace learning paths with choose-your-own-rabbit-hole experiences. Provide a starting provocation, essential principles, and access to AI guidance—then let learners explore. The path emerges from their curiosity.

Focus on contextual enablement, not content delivery. Ensure that when anyone faces a real challenge, they have simple access to guidance—whether AI, colleagues, or other resources.

Evaluate personalization by outcomes, not features. Stop counting “personalized pathways.” Start measuring whether people get help matched to their actual needs when those needs arise.

The Courage to Stop Pretending

Most organizations know their “personalized learning” isn’t genuinely personal. They know learners recognize the gap. But admitting it means confronting whether traditional infrastructure can survive.

| *It cannot.*

When any employee can have a genuinely personalized conversation with AI about their specific challenge and receive immediately applicable guidance—for free, instantly—the pretense of personalization through dropdown menus becomes absurd.

The future doesn't belong to organizations with sophisticated adaptive algorithms for routing people through predetermined content. It belongs to those willing to admit that real *personalization requires giving up control*—letting learners drive their journey, ask their questions, set their pace, and follow their curiosity.

That's terrifying for an industry built on designing, delivering, and measuring predetermined experiences. Our role fundamentally changes from content creators to context architects, from path designers to enablers of exploration, from teachers to igniters of curiosity.

But it's the only honest path forward. Because personalization isn't something we do to learning. It's what learning becomes when we stop preventing it.

The question isn't whether your platform has personalization features. *It's whether you're ready to create conditions where genuine personalization—shaped by each learner's agency, context, and curiosity—can emerge.*

That requires letting go of the lie we've been telling.
And building something true instead.

Have you recently gone through any truly personalized learning experiences? Are you trying to create something that's very different from what exists? Have you come across any powerful AI features to help embed greater personalization and learning contextualization?

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