



Learning What They Live

A relational education model individualizes learning using technology

by Amanda Hankel, editor

If you visited nearly any school in the United States today, you would find a traditional education model: A teacher usually prepare lessons plans, stand near the of the room, facing a class of 20 or more students, presenting lectures and lessons, administer exams to assess knowledge and comprehension and evaluate these exams—often using personal time to do so.

But at any school in the country, you're also likely to find at least a few students who don't seem to adapt to or excel in this traditional education model.

What happens to these students?

According to Erika Twani, CEO of the [Learning One to One Foundation](#) in Miami Beach, FL, it's likely if a child doesn't understand something, the class still moves on, and the opportunity for the student to further explore a topic he or she didn't grasp the first time is bypassed. Eventually, this can lead to the student dropping out or becoming uninterested in attending a university after high school.

It is instances such as this that the Learning One to One Foundation is looking to address. Founded in November 2011, the foundation is working to disseminate in the United States an educational method called Fontan Relational Education, mainly working with the students who are unable to adapt to the traditional education model.

The method, which has been used for 55 years in public and private institutions in Colombia, Chile and Spain, is a self-learning, relational education model that designs a personalized learning path based on each student's abilities, likes, dislikes, interests and unique learning rhythm. Students use technology to engage in a one-to-one learning relationship with educators, and everything the child learns somehow relates back to the student's own reality and life. For a school to implement this system, it must undergo a true school reform.

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“Each student has a computer, each educator has a computer. There are no classrooms, lecturing or exams,” Twani said “We customize learning paths for each student. It addresses all aspects of the students’ learning experience that will allow them to realize their full potential.”

Six distinct principles

While this model already sounds like a far cry from the traditional education system most U.S. schools follow, Twani said there are six principles that set this model apart:

1. The system adapts to each student, not the contrary. “In a traditional model, if a student doesn’t adapt to the model of having the teacher at the front and taking a test and passing a grade, they are called the student who cannot adapt or the troubled student,” Twani said.

But using the Fontan model, a student’s individualized learning plan is designed specifically for him or her and how the individual student learns best.

“We adapt to each student,” Twani said. “For instance, if a student has attention deficit disorder (ADD), instead of labeling him or her ADD, we will explore the times of the day and activities that will enable the student to perform his or her best, adapting the system so they will learn what they need to.”

2. Autonomy. “This system prepares students to learn by themselves, with the support of their educators, so they will continue to learn on their own after they leave school,” Twani said. “Because they’re learning by themselves, and exploring the things that they like and areas in which they excel, the hope is they’ll go on to create new jobs and professions or products in those areas that may not yet exist.”

3. Educators as catalysts. Under the Fontan model, educators do not lecture, correct assessments, give grades or prepare lesson plans. They’re there to influence the process of learning but not be a part of it, Twani said.

“They are an agent that initiates that force but remains unaffected by that action of learning,” Twani said. “Everything the student learns—science, math, languages, for example—relates to their world and reality, and is influenced by the educator, but the educator is not a part of it. So, when students leave school, that will continue to happen. Currently, in the traditional model, we see students leaving school, and they don’t know how to learn anymore because they need somebody to teach them. It is true life-long learning.”

4. Student excellence. “In this system, time is variable, quality is constant,” Twani said.

By this she means every student must reach the equivalent of an A—or excellence, as it’s called in the model—in every topic of study, regardless of how long it takes them to achieve it.

“If you get a C in a certain subject, you have a gap, say, of 40%,” Twani explained. “If you carry that gap throughout your years of schooling, at the end, you’ll have 40% left you didn’t learn that is essential for you to learn something else in the future. So we don’t leave gaps behind. Students can’t leave a certain topic, chapter or subject until they reach excellence.”

The hope is that this mentality of achieving excellence is instilled in students at an early age, and everything they do in their life will be with excellence—school, careers, family and personal relationships.

“If students are trained in getting Cs throughout their lives, they’ll think that’s OK,” Twani said. “‘That C relationship with my work is OK,’ or ‘A C relationship with my family is OK,’ or ‘A C level of professionalism is OK.’ If you train students to do excellent in everything they do during their school years, it’s going to be natural for them.”

5. Goal orientation. In developing their learning plan at the beginning of the year based on individual skills, knowledge, likes and dislikes, students also must develop a goal for each topic they study. This goal is how excellence is measured.

“What we’ve seen is every time you have a goal-oriented method, when students understand what their weaknesses and strengths are, they develop great self-esteem,” Twani



said. “They are more confident on things they can do and augment them, and understand things they cannot do and develop them.”

6. Relational education. The model is called relational education because everything students study must “relate” back to their reality in some way. Twani gave an example of a student who applied learning fractions to buying cows, understanding he’ll be able to buy as many cows as he could afford with the amount of money he has.

“What happens here is his parents are farmers, and they have cows. That’s what they do for a living,” Twani said. “Whenever students are relating what they learn to their lives, they increase knowledge retention. They’ll never forget. They may forget the theory, but they’ll never forget what they live.”

Technology reigns, challenges exist

Because this educational model is so individualized and one-to-one focused, technology plays a huge part in supporting it. Students and educators mainly work on laptops, but Twani said students are free to explore different tools and technology. They don’t recommend slate-type gadgets, such as iPads, because they’re more focused on information consumption, rather than knowledge creation.

“Students must create knowledge in this learning system,” she said. “They write essays and create concept maps a lot. So we mainly use laptops for work.”

Twani said the use of technology is essential today in allowing students access to the most relevant information to explore topics in-depth. Every four years, the information available in the world doubles—and 90% of it is on the web, she said. Having all learning plans online also allows students, parents and educators to access plans and progress at any time.

Of course, the up front cost of technology and infrastructure acquisition is a key challenge for many institutions when it comes to implementing this system. But that’s where the foundation comes in, Twani said. The foundation works with donors to help schools acquire the technology, implement the right infrastructure to support a new system and train teachers.



The other key challenge is teacher engagement. Because this model involves a true school reform, 5% of teachers won't adapt due to an unwillingness to change Twani said. But, after most teachers are on board and the system has been established, she added, it has the potential to actually help lower costs in the educational system.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics report, "The Condition of Education 2011,"¹ 69.2% of expenditures in the current system go to teacher compensation and benefits, Twani said. Twenty-eight percent goes to debt payment, leaving 5% for investments in everything else. Lowering costs would help to improve education quality, Twani said.

"As the level of student autonomy increases with time, educators will still work with the students, but not as often," she said. "So we can have more students per educator, and we can have better educators. We can increase compensation of those educators, while decreasing the overall cost."

While the foundation is still in the beginning phases of working with schools in the United States and finalizing the curriculum so it can be incorporated into any U.S. school, Twani said she is confident the benefits of this system will outweigh the costs or obstacles, especially for students who are having difficulty adapting to the traditional model of education and may need a more personalized model.

"If students learn to learn by themselves, they'll continue to do that throughout their lives," Twani said.

Along with this autonomy, Twani also said she believes the model helps students develop the self-esteem necessary to grow into strong professionals, family members and citizens and provides the entrepreneurial skills to solve real-world problems.

"Students are actors of their learning experience," she said. "They act upon what they learn, and the dream of consistent academic performance is possible for every single student."

For more information:

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- “Case Study Video on Personalization Showcasing a School in Colombia,” www.microsoft.com/showcase/en/us/details/a03f30e9-778b-40d3-a421-d539163cf0df.
- “Fontan Relational Education—Testimonials,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yjpc7BZ4EUU.
- CNN Chile, “Conozca la implementación del sistema de Educación Relacional,” (Spanish only) www.cnnchile.cl/nacional/2012/01/19/conozca-la-implementacion-del-sistema-de-educacion-relacional.

Be sure to attend a presentation, “[Learning One to One in the Knowledge Age](#)” by Erika Twani, CEO, and Virginia Emmons McNaught, chief expansion officer of the Learning One to One Foundation, at the [2012 National Quality Education Conference](#).

References

1. National Center for Education Statistics, “The Condition of Education 2011,” May 2011, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2011033>