CHAPTER 2

DESIGN

Our students have changed radically.

Today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach.

—Marc Prensky

Picture for a moment a classroom full of students happily learning new concepts in unique and interesting ways. The teacher here does very little lecturing, knowing that every student in the class learns differently and at different speeds. So instead of lecturing to a standard curriculum, this teacher instead has each student working on the same topic, but in different areas and at a different pace. Essentially, the teacher has personalized the learning for each student.
When I describe this scenario to many people in education circles, I usually get a slight chuckle, followed by an immediate dismissal. “That’s ideal,” they say, “but it’s wishful thinking.” One person called it a utopian dream that, he said, “could never be done on any large scale in America.” Another simply shook her head and smiled, saying, “That’s how it should be, but it would take a miracle to make it actually happen in this country.”

What they did not know at the time, however, is that the scenario that I’m describing has actually already happened—all across America. It’s exactly how teachers in nearly all of the classic, one-room schoolhouses in the early 1800s taught. It wasn’t the future I was describing; it was the past.

So, what happened? How did we lose that level of customized learning? While historians can point to dozens of reasons (e.g., population growth), the change can actually be traced back to an event that took place on March 20, 1856, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This event would later prove to be the beginning of the end of customized learning and teaching for the next hundred years. It was not a war, depression, or assassination that changed the course of educational history, but rather the single idea of a man named Fred.

ONE BEST WAY

As a child, Frederick Taylor was not unlike many other children growing up at the time. He was born into a Quaker family; his father was a wealthy attorney, and his mother a feisty abolitionist. After being homeschooled by his mother, Taylor studied
abroad, then attended Phillips Exeter Academy, an elite private school in Exeter, New Hampshire. He earned an undergraduate degree from the Stevens Institute of Technology, then worked as a mechanical engineer, developing a knack for getting things done quickly and efficiently. In fact, he proved to be so much more efficient in his work that he began to question why others could not be just as efficient as he was. Factory workers, he noted, were often intentionally doing less work than he knew they were capable of, and he despised it—he believed it hurt his employers’ bottom line.

In an effort to change things, Taylor extensively studied efficiency and productivity, putting his findings into his 1911 book *The Principles of Scientific Management*.

With their zeal for maximizing efficiency and productivity, Taylor’s ideas swept the country, making his book one of the most influential management guides of all time. His concepts transformed all types of businesses and organizations by eliminating “waste” (and skilled workers) in many industries by breaking jobs into small, individual tasks nearly anyone could do. This change saved employers a lot of money, as they would not have to pay for skilled professionals. It also meant that they needed a great number of unskilled workers to replace those skilled professionals. Managers didn’t need or want their workers to be very smart; to maximize productivity and output, according to “Taylorism,” it was management’s job to be smart, and the worker’s job to do the tasks exactly as assigned.

It was at this point that work in the United States began being equated with *quantity* rather than *quality*. It was no longer about how good you were, but how fast you were. Speed was much easier to quantify and use to hold people accountable. Energized by