

Personalising learning: ICT enabling universal access

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The notion of 'personalised learning' recognises that, while significant improvements have been made by teachers focusing their attention on the progress made by the whole class, further progress requires a focus on the individual learner. This discussion is part of a wider debate about the reform of public services. It mirrors developments in the commercial and industrial world, such as the move away from 'Fordist' models of mass-production towards newer models offering 'mass customisation'. Within the public sector the debate centres on how best to move from a world where the individual responds to the system and its structures to one where the systems and structures themselves are designed to respond flexibly to individual need.

Broadly speaking, three approaches to the issue have emerged:

- increasing flexibility and responsiveness on the supply/provider side. In education this is typified by new approaches to qualification routes, increasing local autonomy and a general move away from centrally determined approaches to teaching and learning
- increasing the influence of market forces by increasing consumer choice and moving power and influence towards the demand side. For example education vouchers could turn learners/parents into purchasers of educational services which compete for their custom
- increasing participation at all levels in the design and delivery of services through real engagement with customers, professionals and

stakeholders, as exemplified in recent publications by Demos. *Student voice*, a concept that goes beyond formal representation on student councils, is being increasingly offered as one approach to engaging learners with the design and delivery of their own learning experiences.

However personalised learning is interpreted all are agreed that this is not a policy that can be 'delivered' in the current sense. Success depends on individual institutions' ability to innovate, and the means for successful innovations to spread quickly throughout the system to aid coherence and secure a fair and equitable national education provision. These aspirations are new. At the risk of over-simplifying, education policy and practice can be characterised as a competition between individualised approaches to learning, which at their best motivate learners by building on individual interests and aspirations, but at their worst leave learners unchallenged by low expectations (by embedding stereotypes in expectations – 'these kids wouldn't like Mozart'), and overly prescriptive national 'entitlement' models, which (again, at their worst) accommodate the average while failing to address many learners' needs. Neither is satisfactory.

While the limits of 'one size fits all' are clear, it is not sufficient to encourage diversity in what is offered to learners if that diversity simply replicates and reinforces existing disadvantage. This presents significant challenges. How do we shift attention onto the individual learner, ensuring that individual expectations are sufficiently challenging, capitalising on learners' increasing personal access to alternative sources of learning support and information? How do teachers monitor individual progress and ensure that feedback to learners is evidence-based, informed by a whole-institution perspective, timely and aimed at increasing performance without increasing their workload? How do we

maximise the spread in effective practice, and change current teaching and learning support systems (based on central command and control models), to systems that can effectively support the culture change and flexibilities envisaged by the adoption of personalised learning?

I believe that past attempts to reconcile these competing challenges often failed because we lacked the appropriate tools. Mode 3 CSEs (while offering courses that matched local need) were not scalable in a way that gave the qualification currency outside the locality. Teachers simply could not 'know' a class of learners as individuals so 'taught to the middle'. Revision notes from your local bookshop notwithstanding, few schools could offer a second chance at learning anything, and those that did often simply repeated the earlier experience. Given this history it is unsurprising that, while enthusiastically embracing the concept of 'personalised learning', many teachers see it as a utopian aspiration some distance from real practice in real classrooms.

Properly supported and implemented I believe that ICT will play a key role in reconciling these potential conflicts and meeting these challenges. In particular it may be possible to achieve individual excellence while providing equity for all, through the potential of ICT to allow 'intelligent accountability' – where accountability is to individual learners for their learning, as well as to government acting on the nation's behalf. I might go further. I can think of no other sector which has managed to move, at scale, from Henry Ford's 'any colour so long as it's black' to something more tailored to individual need without using ICT.

So what can ICT contribute to this agenda? What can it do to help make learning 'personalised'? Drawing on a variety of sources it seems clear that ICT can increase learners' motivation, through greater engagement and increased control over their own learning processes.

It puts new tools in the hands of learners, allowing them to try out different approaches, form and test hypotheses, and grasp abstract ideas by constructing models. Collaborative tools enable effective collaboration and peer feedback in and outside the classroom. It can provide 'authentic' experiences, giving learners immediate access to richer, engaging primary source materials and the opportunity to take part in authentic, collaborative problem-solving and provide access to expertise, allowing the possibility of learners accessing information at the point when it is of most value to them. Content sources and resources can be personalised, offering an interface in line with the learner's needs and preferences, and providing personalised pathways through that content. Effective assessment for learning is supported by offering learners new ways to demonstrate what they have achieved, and helping teachers 'know' their learners better. Flexible, adaptive, powerful reporting tools allow for a detailed understanding of the progress being made by individuals and groups while making minimal bureaucratic demands on teaching and non-teaching staff.

This offers a vision for personalised learning where:

- for learners, ICT enhances and motivates learners by engaging them with their own learning and matching experiences to their needs. It allows them to drive their learning at their own pace and to demonstrate and record

their achievements in a variety of ways. It supports individual interaction and collaboration between learners and provides all learners, irrespective of their personal circumstances, with access to learning where and when they need it – supporting continuity of learning

- for the educational workforce, ICT supports more efficient and effective teaching, administration and management, allowing the workforce to identify and respond flexibly to need. It provides new opportunities for the educational workforce to support teaching and learning, extending their roles and influence beyond existing institutional barriers. It provides access to continuing professional development, linking learners, teachers and other members of the educational workforce through communities of professional practice
- for educational institutions, ICT improves the ways in which they carry out their business by supporting new institutional models and processes. It allows them to draw on external support to complement their provision, breaking down existing barriers between institutions, the communities they serve, phases of education, and 'formal' and 'informal' learning – extending their offerings beyond the traditional limits of time, geography and culture
- for the educational system as a whole, ICT ensures that innovation and effective practice spreads throughout the system and captures and

communicates information on the system's performance, allowing intelligent accountability, where the locality informs and influences the centre, and the centre adds value to the locality.

Were this vision to be realised it would present significant opportunities. How many of our curriculum aspirations are limited simply because we constrain our thinking to what can be achieved using the familiar tools and techniques of teaching? If we knew that every primary-aged child could spend a year in Spain, how would that affect our expectations for language learning? Understanding that Earth is (approximately) a large sphere, the moon a smaller sphere that orbits it, and that the whole orbits the sun, is not that difficult. It is near impossible to teach it using an apple, an orange and a torch. The new technologies offer a real opportunity to rethink our aspirations for what is learnt, how it is learnt, how that learning is recognised, and how these relate.

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