

Next Practice in Resourcing Personalisation: The Story Continues - thoughts reflections, challenges

The following is a transcript from a discussion session at the Resourcing Personalisation event at Bridgemary Community Sports College. It represents spoken comments and responses between a number of participating speakers.

David Albury:

Personalisation and community

Personalisation is often about how we really help the individual student, and how we're more attentive to the needs of the individual student. But there's something about how we create collaboration, cooperation and promote interdependence. Lots of things I see on personalisation when I look at it talk about the independent learner. We need to talk not just about young people independently being able to do it for themselves as individuals, but how they do it with others, how we create collaboration, teams and cohesion. Schools aren't just about learning, they're also places in which communities cohere and come together, and therefore we need to think about how schools in that place really begin to bring together people as well as being attentive to individual needs.

Local innovation and scale

How do we get things that are really good and interesting such as the virtual school at Villiers to be more widely understood and used? The reason why this is so important is that education is very good at being innovative, but it takes a long time for innovations to spread. And so the question is, how do we do this? Is this just a question of growing it slowly outwards? Is the answer as we start to develop around communities and practice, communities of interest, social networking, and the Next Practice Acceleration Space? Or again, are there things that we need to do that bring together in wider groupings that may be a bit harder edged than communities of practice into chains or stronger network for schools, if necessary? I get so excited on occasions like this, all these different ideas and thinking. But how long is it going to take for some of these to travel their way through the education system?

Openness and evidence

How do we bring into play evidence, case studies, examples of what happens to inform a national guide to Resourcing Personalisation? How do we bring some discipline to bear that says, well that's really interesting that that's gone on there, but does it really work and why did it really work, and being a bit more systematic about how to understand that? Not trying to clamp down on things, but how do we really apply some rigour and robustness, some systemic thinking?

Outcomes and relationships

We've become rather obsessed over the last few years with outcomes. Outcomes are really important. Educational attainment, skills, qualities that people have is really important for them in their lives. But the other thing that struck me today again in a number of conversations is, whilst that is really important, so is the nature of the relationships. The nature of the relationships between teachers and students, students and teachers which a lot has been said about and, slightly less said about though it's been there, about teachers, students and parents or carers or households. And those sets of relationships are as important, not more important but as important as the outcomes in the educational system and that we need to be attentive to that.

Charles Desforges:

I'm not going to tell any jokes. There are two reasons for that. The first is, the idea we're dealing with is massively important and portentous. It's the idea of personalisation strikes me as akin to

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Einstein's Relativity Theory, which stood entirely on our head our understanding of the physical world, and the idea of personalisation stands entirely on our head a couple of hundred years of custom and practice in mass education.

We shift from focus on teaching with the learner as a repository to a focus on learning with the learner as a resource, and that is a massive thing. And you would think in that that the kids would be allies in this venture, but I wouldn't put a lot of money on that, not by any means. They might actually be one of the big resistances in the system because they also have their culture, they have their history and they have their understanding of what faces them. When I first left school I was training to be a ship's engineer, not in the Royal Navy I hasten to add, a much more low profile outfit than that. Anyway, I used to have to go to night school a lot and we had a slogan, a working principle, which was if 35 is the pass mark 36 is a waste of effort, and we felt that very, very strongly. That was our culture. And a good deal of shifting on the personalisation agenda is a shift not only in teachers' cultures but in learners' cultures, and it is really difficult to shift cultures.

I'll give you one brief example which is that about a week ago I went to see a GP, I'd never met this particular GP. I read him out my symptoms and he told me what was wrong with me and I said, because I always say this, "In reaching that hypothesis which hypotheses have you rejected?" and he went bright red. And I said, "And while you're thinking about that, in that hypothesis you've chosen which evidence have I given you that doesn't fit it?" and he said, "Do you want to change your GP?" It's going to be a hard grind to personalise the National Health Service. And I said, "Not yet?"

Anyway, personalisation is a concept that might not be causing you some difficulties, and in fact I've really enjoyed some of the debates and discussion this morning clearly at the cutting edge, but it is causing some difficulty nationwide I think, and if you want a feel for that on the DCSF website there's a report by [Judy Sebba](#). You can get it as a download from the website.

She and her research colleagues have done a national survey of 'where are we?', 'what does personalisation mean out there?', and 'where are we in what we're doing?'. And the short answer is, there's a great deal of confusion about what it means. And in some places we're doing all sorts of exciting things and in a lot of places we're not. There's clearly a challenge, quite a mountain to climb.

And it seems to me there's a core idea in personalisation which people are missing, and it is 'the learner is a resource, not a repository'. The learner is a key crucial resource and a co-producer. Now it might be you don't like those words, it might be they're politically incorrect, but if you're doing all the rest of it, if you're shifting timetables and shifting schedules and shifting this and shifting that but not treating the learner as a co-producer of educational experience, you're not doing personalisation.

Now as I went round, here's a list of a few things that I expected to see flagged but didn't. It may be all these things are happening but they're just not up here on the agenda today. There are other key resources in promoting those achievements. By 'achievement' I mean the *Every Child Matters* broad prospectus. Parents are another key resource. How are we tapping into that and using it in the personalisation agenda? Communities are a key resource in there. What work is being done there? And a question that comes up a lot in people's minds - should the entire venture be personalised or is personalising learning just part of a repertoire of what teachers do? Is there a repertoire of ways in which we could manage learning in which personalising is one facet of the repertoire? And there are others, or is it a whole shebang, you do the whole lot or nothing.

A concept I expected to see scattered about but didn't was the concept of deep learning, which is actually the whole engine room of proper learning. Learning because I need to know. Because

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we know that a lot of kids, a lot of learners at any stage learn surface, they just cling onto bits and pieces of script and hope they remember it for a test. Much more common is strategic learning, which is learning for the test. And we all do it, and Ofsted is a test. What do you want? I'll deliver it to you. When I do my driving test, before I pull off I go like this. This is for the examiner, it serves no purpose to me. I didn't even see the mirror as a matter of fact, but I wanted you to know, examiner, that I look in the mirror before I drive off.

Now that's a sad fact, but the correlated fact is that assessment systems drive educational systems. People learn for the test. Some people have argued that we would rush into personalisation quite quickly if we put it in the assessment system, namely the Ofsted Inspection Framework test. But deep learning says I'm learning this because I want to learn it because I need it in my life, and I've got all sorts of ways in which I want to apply it, and in that way I'll go for connectivity, understanding, practical ability, application and a whole range. So we need a bigger understanding of how we do that.

I also am a bit worried if personalisation is misunderstood, other important concepts might go out of the window. For example, like progression, because learning should always start with where the learner is, but it can't stay there, it's got to move on if we're any use to learners. In the olden days before the National Curriculum people chose to opt out of, sometimes teachers did the choosing and sometimes learners did the choosing, but so, for example, most girls opted out of Science, which meant by the age of 12 they were cut off from a whole range of valuable learning activities and profitable careers and job opportunities. How do you balance personalisation with a properly balanced entitlement curriculum and a good brisk sense of progression?

So there's a whole pile of worries. Are we clear on the concept? Do we know how to operate with it? Are we pulling in other resources like parents, families, communities? Have we got a good working grasp of deep learning? And are we balancing personalisation with entitlement, pace and progression?

Gene Payne:

Thanks very much Charles and David. We would like you to focus your questions around "One of the things that's troubling me about personalisation is ..." You might also have your paradoxes, your challenges, your insights, your thoughts, those things that worry you about this situation. Equally if there are questions David and Charles that you're burning to ask, that's an opportunity too.

Derek Wise:

I've always seen an independent learner as a learner that would know when they choose to work with a team, when it would be helpful to work with one other for that one other, when it would be helpful for them to work with some others for them, when it is most useful to. And I guess it's the skilling up of the independent learner so that the independent means being able to make choices about my learning that involves my community, my partner and myself. So that was I guess a response to the teamwork.

Comment:

It would be individuals who are knowledgeable enough about themselves and about the context they're learning in, the subject they're learning in to be able to make choices and discuss those choices often in a team way, sometimes in an independent way.

Comment:

But could this person always choose never to be a leader?

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Reply:

I think that in my vision of it they would be challenged enough to mean that they shouldn't. Whether they would be forced, it depends.

Comment:

Do they need to be the leader though, if they're comfortable in the activity and they're contributing to the group?

Reply:

I think it's a very good question - whether we ought to broaden people's view of themselves. For example, here's my view of myself. I've had a look at leadership and I don't want it. I can't do it anyway. Should the system encourage me to repaint that picture, to equip me and skill me, or are you going to always let me always avoid things that I feel I'm not terribly confident at?

Derek Wise:

I guess it would go back partly to the assessment. If the assessment demands that a leadership role has been played then you could if you wanted to. But my point was really that I think you'd have better teams and better teamwork through having better independent learners, and often for me the dissatisfaction of teamwork comes from not enough understanding of self and self ability. And so there needs to be focus on the individual and the independent learning, in order that I can play a fuller role and there be better more productive teamwork.

David Albury:

I'm not equating personalisation with independent learning. It's a real tension that exists between these notions of independence and interdependence. Charles gave a very persuasive argument - personalisation is the sort of great transformation of education. I think it may well be part of it, but I think I could also at least suggest that it's a very consumerist notion of education at the same time, which concentrates on the individual. There are things that are held by groups, that are done by groups. Households, communities do things which aren't just an aggregate of individual actions. I absolutely don't want to polarise this, which is why I keep trying to use in everything I did an 'and' in this.

Comment:

One of the things that's bothering me is that, whilst I accept fully that youngsters, young people, could be a further constraint or a further obstacle in terms of the perceptions, what seems to be a bigger issue is the culture of adults. All those issues to do with structure, assessment for learning, learners taking responsibilities for their learning focus on us being able to change the behaviour of the adults in the schools.

I've seen good examples of change management, but in terms of the massive change that we're going through with regard to Schools For The Future. For instance, I'm not confident that we've really cracked that or indeed have really understood in any sense yet. Building new schools is a waste of time if you don't get the learning right, and to get the learning right you've got to get the relationships right, and that's a massive change because schools are being run by people like me and people from our generation who have actually been successful in the past, and how do we get that mass change of culture for the next 20, 30, 40 years.

David Albury:

But I think that timescale is so important. What excites me is hearing the examples, however small they may be, however local they may be at the time, of these sorts of changed relationships and different behaviours and different culture. But culture change takes a long time, especially in deep seated systems like the education system. And part of what I was trying to say about scale is also about pace. What are the best mechanisms of accelerating this process of spread or diffusion of where it's actually happening? How do we continue to energise this in such a way that

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learning begins to spread? It goes back I think to something Charles said, you can very easily get surface compliance. We all know what to say to the Ofsted inspector in order to get good marks on Ofsted inspection, or whatever it is. I'd much rather people take that longer time to really rethink the role of what being a teacher means, in a 21st century rather than a 19th century context.

Richard Wheal:

I think we need to capture the pictures. When you think of pictures of school you think of large numbers of people in uniform, you think of people who've learned the language that they share, you think of pictures of team sports, you think of pictures of people sitting in serried ranks doing exams when they're all writing the same thing with the same pen in the same hand. The big pictures of education are pictures of conformity, and in personalisation I don't know what the pictures will be, but we will have to put into people's heads image of dissimilarity.

Comment:

A couple of things bother me, and one of the things, one of the things this morning I have not heard is about globalisation, and where personalisation fits into the globalisation agenda. When you think of the large percent of jobs, the knowledge and understanding that students now will need, so where can we actually get that personalisation agenda and those concepts and understanding that will actually meet the needs of those students in the future? And what's their role within that. Those are questions I find quite difficult to wrestle with.

Anne Eardley:

I think these two are linked, because if we go back to the point made over here of 'we don't know about the role we're going into but the children know, the learners know', so, which is the pupil voice thing again. If we ask our learners, and I'm speaking from a primary view here, what and how they want to learn, and we truly listen to what they say to us, which we are in the process of doing, or well on into it, and then we look at the huge issue of globalisation and what is happening internationally in countries like China and India where they're going to be ahead of us. Are we going to become a developing country in a few years' time because we haven't got the teachers and the headteachers and haven't got it right for children? And surely personalisation is all about probably a child leaving school and still being hugely passionate and motivated about being a learner, because they're not going to go into roles like ours, which is pretty much in education all your life, they're going to have to work in lots of different environments.

So the skills of tolerance, integrity, coping with change and setting up those learning situations in school, it's okay not to succeed, it's okay to get stuck. Yes, you must be self-critical and self-supportive in your problem solving and risk taking. With such a risk-averse society now in schools, I think we have to look at that and encourage children in their decision making about how, because that way they might not get to that, and then they've solved the problem and so they become better at sorting it out, because once they leave school that's what they're going to have to do.

Mark Lovatt:

Can I just add to that? I may be picking it up wrongly, but I think it goes back to the point that Charles made. I don't think the children do know the world they're going into. I think that they're concerned with texting their mates and making dates and so on. I don't think they necessarily have still a big picture of the world as perhaps a changing thing, and that they're going to have to learn differently and different skills to cope and be successful in that world. And it goes back to Charles's point when he said that I don't think we can assume naturally that the student culture is changing with us. One is to almost ask the question, 'look at your world, this is how it's changing. What do you need to do differently or what do you need to be taught? What do you need to learn to be successful in that, as a way of engaging the changing of the culture of the students, as well as engaging the changing culture of the education and teachers?'

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Charles Desforges:

I do think we need to look very carefully at the dynamics, whether you're talking about a classroom or a school or a family or whatever. It's very easy to almost accidentally fall into a top down model. I think the National College for School Leadership assumes heads run schools, which in my experience is a preposterous idea. Parents don't run families, the Government doesn't run the country. The dynamics are quite complex, and if you look at the history of persuasion for example, parents are hopeless at stopping kids smoking but kids are quite good at stopping parents smoking. There's a real counter flow of influence which is a dynamic, and part of personalisation is tapping into that dynamic but on a proper understanding of it, not a naïve understanding of it.

That is why the key concept for me is co-production. Personalisation doesn't mean we hand the whole ship over to the kids. It means we see them as a massive resource, but also a limited resource that needs working up, that needs to learn how to learn, that needs the bigger picture. But it's still also a very dynamic process and it will happen anyway. But they're not the only part of the dynamic, the parents and the communities, especially parents are part of the dynamic of what youngsters bring to school, what they expect out of school, and what their aspiration will be.

Michael Peters:

Charles, you said something that has disturbed me a bit and I just wanted to explore that. You're quite right, I think, when you talk about it being a level of co-production but what I didn't hear was the need to shift power balance. So could you just say something about the power relationship between young people and adults?

Charles Desforges:

The power balance has to shift, but it has to shift in a responsible and prepared way. We're not talking chuck them in at the deep end here obviously, so there has to be extensive development. If you look at the variance in learning outcomes and say where, which big variances account for the big variance in learning output, top of the list are variances in pupils. Pupils are associated with much bigger variance in learning output than any other factor. So they need to be equipped to bring more to the party of achievement than they do at the moment, not only in terms of skill but in terms of power. I agree with that. The second factor is parents, and differences in parenting. So again, if you want return on effort this is the second lever to pull, and again it's a question partly of skill, people need skilling up, and partly it's a question of power.

Comment:

I think it's got to be getting the balance of doing and reflecting right as well, hasn't it? I don't see enough time for reflecting, thinking about thinking and in the strategy side of things I sometimes don't see enough wholehearted doing. It's bringing a balance of the two together I think.

Charles Desforges:

I think the shift needs to be from 'education is something done *to me*' to 'education is something done *with me*', and the '*with me*' can involve your concept of co-production, because in their life outside school many youngsters are co-creators, co-producers using technology. And unless we adapt quickly in the formal educational system, that sort of tension is going to cause all sorts of difficulties. This also leads to this confusion about what independent learning is. The concept of independent learning often is expressed juxtaposed against the passive learner reliant on the teacher, and in fact what we're trying to create, whether you equate it with personalised learning or not, is a student who's independent enough to be able to not rely on the teacher but rely on their own resources, make their own choices and so on. But that then comes back to 'education is done not *to me* but *with me*'. '*With me*' means I'm involved in the learning process, I understand what's happening, I can have a say in it, and I might even then start to take my own responsibility for my own learning. And it seems to me that's where personalised learning hopes to get to.

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Links:

Background to Personalising Learning on the SSAT website

<http://www.ssat-inet.net/pdf/Background%20to%20Personalising%20Learning.pdf>

Parents engage with schools to raise achievement on the SSAT website

<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/programmeofresearch/projectinformation.cfm?projectid=14664&resultspage=1>