

## What is personalised learning?

Buzz-words can be interchangeable. In some conversations, 'personalised learning' sounds very like 'student-centred', so it can degenerate into a vague term of approval that has as many meanings as it does users.

Also, once a phrase it is officially approved, it has market currency and is immediately associated with new products or services, so that marketing speak takes over from rational discourse. If the phrase is to be meaningful, it has to be used with precision.

So what do government documents mean by it? Is that how you understand the term? How might it change according to time and place?

As early as 2004, the TLRP referred to personalised learning as The Big Idea - <http://www.tlrp.org/documents/ESRCPerson.pdf>.

In January 2007, the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review described the hallmarks of personalised learning and made the case for why all schools need to work towards this vision -

<http://publications.education.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DFES-04255-2006&>

Personalising learning is learner-centred and knowledge-centred .... close attention is paid to learners' knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes. Learners are active and curious: they create their own hypotheses, ask their own questions, coach one another, set goals for themselves, monitor their progress and experiment with ideas for taking risks, knowing that mistakes and 'being stuck' are part of learning. Work is sufficiently varied and challenging to maintain their engagement but not so difficult as to discourage them.

This engagement allows learners of all abilities to succeed, and it avoids the disaffection and attention-seeking that give rise to problems with behaviour." It is also "assessment-centred" using both formative and summative systems to encourage learners to "take an active role in their learning" and to encourage them to reflect and review. (p6).

In this context, personalisation can sound like just another word for good teaching, but expressed as a Platonic ideal.

Personalisation is also said to be a "matter of moral purpose and social justice" (p7) and change-drivers include an expectation of greater social diversity, increased mental health disorders and changing work patterns (p9). In that context, it can sometimes look like a term for coping with Armageddon, where teachers are responsible for changing human behaviour on a massive scale whilst dealing with social and economic chaos. It can also sound like something used in a remedial sense, to deal with the less able to

put right a problem, as opposed to something positive that defines a rational approach in any context.

The term becomes so packed with meaning it means everything, and thus nothing. One could choose a particular theme, for example, the role of feedback in learning and thus the need to use assessment methods that encourage self-evaluation, but a colleague with different problems might focus elsewhere, such as the use of small group work to overcome ESL difficulties.

Can “personalised learning” mean something concrete in opposition to, say, “non-personalised learning” without just meaning “good teaching” as expressed by idealists? Is it just a convenient title for a larger and complex reformation. The answer to both is probably ‘yes’.

Teaching and Learning in 2020 defines the “skills for personalising learning” as:

- analysing and using data, with a specific focus on assessment for learning
- understanding how children learn and develop
- working with other adults (including parents and other children’s services professionals)
- engaging pupils as active participants in learning (p31).

This has implications for ITT and CPD and provides an outline of what “personalisation” means in most government documents.

Much of the content for 20:20 is taken directly from Personalised Learning – A Practical Guide which was launched in October 2008 (download at <http://publications.education.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DCSF-00844-2008&>)

The Practical Guide starts by defining personalised learning as “taking a highly structured and responsive approach to each child’s and young person’s learning, in order that all are able to progress, achieve and participate. It means strengthening the link between learning and teaching by engaging pupils – and their parents – as partners in learning”. (p5)

The idea that a connection should exist between teaching and learning ought not to sound radical. If the government think they are presently disconnected, they are asking for more than a new technique. The term is clearly a useful label for an overall approach to education, and is explained under 9 subheadings.

Information based on the National Strategies can be found at <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/personalisedlearning>

Key elements are high expectations and careful planning which are again discussed under the nine headings:

<b>High quality teaching</b>	<p>Includes the ideal that students will be involved, engaged, accept responsibility for their own learning and work independently. Raises the question of how to teach weaker students in a group without lowering expectations.</p> <p><i>Was that not part of all previous teaching? Why not?</i></p>
<b>Target setting and tracking</b>	<p>Insists that targets setting should be ambitious and based on precise data, detailing some of the potential sources.</p> <p><i>This begs the question of how reliable any data set might be and how skilled you are at knowing what you need to know, interpreting it when you get it and applying the conclusions. Assumes more autonomy than some teachers have? Or think they have?</i></p>
<b>Focused assessment</b>	<p>Measures whether the expected progress has been made. It is important that “every child knows how they are doing and understands what they need to do to improve.... it is rarely enough to simply set a pupil a numeric or curricular target ... They need to understand not just what to improve but how to improve”. There are three kinds of assessment for learning. Day to Day includes sharing lesson objectives and getting feedback. Periodic includes planning with reference to national standards. Transitional might involve external tests to recognise achievement. There is a recognition of spiky profiles.</p> <p><i>The importance of feedback cannot be overstressed, tied to discussion about metacognition – how do you (can you) teach people to learn? Is that an addition to teaching them history or part of doing it properly?</i></p>
<b>Intervention</b>	<p>The documents refer to three waves. Wave 1 is class based teaching. Wave 2 is small group work, often used to accelerate progress or for 'catch-up' learning. Wave 3 is the individualised approach, perhaps intensive 1-1, both for weaker and for the gifted and talented.</p> <p>See also  <a href="http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/87562">http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/87562</a>  and  <a href="http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/41825">http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/41825</a></p> <p><i>Does this encourage a view that personalised learning is always something you do from temporarily and often as an emergency solution to a problem? A positive view would include the idea of differentiating projects and support materials from the start, to avoid rather than solve</i></p>

	<i>problems? Is this easier to achieve with older students, e.g. in FE, or with certain kinds of teaching?</i>
<b>Grouping</b>	<p>Might be by “age, ability, friendship groups or gender”..... guided learning is an instructional sequence for small groups which is integrated into lessons to provide a bridge between whole-class teaching and independent work”</p> <p><i>Flexibility within an organisation assumes a professional’s ability to organise the experience of their own students, making whatever changes they think right.</i></p>
<b>The learning environment</b>	<p>Includes all aspects of the environment, including resources, and the key term is flexibility.</p> <p><i>How much authority does a fully qualified and experienced teacher have over the wider environment? Do we need to encourage more awareness of their discretionary powers?</i></p>
<b>Curriculum Organisation</b>	<p>Stresses the flexibility of the National Curriculum, the idea of stage not age and cooperation (eg school and college 14-19) to offer more choices to suit students’ needs.</p> <p><i>Which could mean ‘don’t do what you think you have been told – do what you know to be right. You have their permission to serve the interests of the student by deviating as required’.</i></p>
<b>The Extended Curriculum</b>	<p>Cooperation with “a range of local providers, agencies and other schools” makes it easier to deliver ECM goals.</p> <p><i>Ask not for whom the bell tolls. Localism in 2010-11 is just the latest of a series of moves to involve other agencies and motives for doing so vary widely.</i></p>
<b>Supporting wider needs</b>	<p>Stresses relationship with families and the multi-agency team with a lead professional (LP)</p> <p><i>More discretion within a classroom is matched with far more connection outside.</i></p>

In 2004, David Milliband was Minister for School Standards and Professor David Hargreaves, Chair of Becta, Associate Director of the Specialist Schools Trust, a senior Demos Associate and a Fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge – as well as a major influence on the development of Personalised Learning. Interviewed by Futurelab, Hargreaves described PL as "a complex and continuing professional process of education", emphasising the notion of process over product. At an OECD conference, Milliband had referred to “building the organisation of schooling around the needs, interests and aptitudes of individual pupils” whilst Hargreaves warned that “teachers have generally responded well to the pressures on them to improve, but

unless they are willing to reconsider the structure of the profession in a more radical way, the transition will be far more painful than it needs to be." So it was never just about a new technique we can apply but about a new way of being professional, with new relationships and structures. Certainly, the notion of consulting students about their learning had powerful advocates. The TRLP research sheet No5 June 2003 argues that "how to listen and learn, as well as to teach and lead, is the challenge for teachers, schools and their communities".

Hargreaves' influence may also be seen through iNet and the SSAT. Discussion of the so-called nine gateways may be found at <http://www.ssat-inet.net/whatwedo/personalisinglearning/personalisinglearninggateway.aspx>

They are

- Assessment for learning
- Learning to learn
- Student voice
- Curriculum
- New technologies
- School design and organisation
- Advice and guidance
- Mentoring and coaching
- Workforce development

There are associated publications at: <http://www.ssat-inet.net/resources/publications/publicationdescriptions/personalisinglearningseries1.aspx> and <http://www.ssat-inet.net/resources/publications/publicationdescriptions/personalisinglearningseries2.aspx>

By 2007, a report entitled Personalised Learning Approaches used by Schools was able to look at how this was working out in practice. (<http://www.ttrb.ac.uk/ViewArticle2.aspx?ContentId=15806>)

It concluded:

Many of the factors that seem to facilitate progress in the case study schools are not specific to personalised learning, for example a strong focus on learning, effective staff development and successful leadership ... personalised learning ... seemed to have multiple meanings across the school ... (p68)

But is also pointed out:

One contrast that has emerged from this work, relates to the established practice in public services of fitting individuals to the services offered, whereas all the case study schools had adopted approaches based on the premise of adapting the service to meet the needs of the pupils. (p69)

citing with approval Hargreaves' statement that:

... instead of expecting students to adapt to the pre-ordained structures, practices and routines of the school, these could all be questioned and if necessary adapted better to meet the needs of learners. Instead of students being expected to fit into the school, the school was being changed to fit the learning demands of students.(p69)

They asked whether personalised learning approaches offered anything new and concluded that:

schools which might be characterised as strong on personalised learning see learners as co-investors in education, not in the financial sense, but in terms of their aspirations and commitment to learning. They maintain the focus on learning and all other activities are seen as contributing to this. However, the learning on which they focus goes beyond the school to future employment, health and citizenship. It is exemplary in lifelong learning, by giving pupils the skills to learn and motivating them to succeed in their own interests and aspirations and hence in their own terms. (p72)

Another route through National Strategies emphasises the need to plan interventions carefully. The idea of provision maps (<http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/41683>) is to offer an “at-a-glance way of showing the range of provision the school makes for children with additional needs, through additional staffing or peer support.”

This does not mean personalised learning is an idea only relevant to people with special needs, but it does encourage the view that it is somehow more relevant, or perhaps especially relevant. This is probably not deliberate and is certainly not the case, but could good teaching as defined by the documentation prevent some students from developing special needs?

There is also room for confusion when an apparently new idea seems to describe something that is already being done. For example, Connexions staff could have spoken with authority about CAF, a standardised approach to conducting an assessment of a child's additional needs and deciding how those needs should be met, used by practitioners across the country, or about APIR, the Assessment, Planning, Implementation and Review which is the assessment tool Personal Advisers use for recording sessions and work with young people. Successful practitioners sometimes find that new thinking is only their old thinking being more widely shared, but now top down instead of bottom up.

So, after all that, what is personalised learning, and what is it not?

It is not a product or a single technique. It is a process founded on a philosophy. It is an attitude and methodology rather than a set of dogmas. But It insists that even though a class is a group, and may have to be taught as such some of the time, the education of each individual within that group must be based on:

- A clear understanding, accurately recorded, of the personal strengths, weaknesses and potential of the individual learner
- A relationship in school or college where the individual learner is able to discuss rationally with responsible adults how they are learning, what to do if they are not and how to improve. Note - it is not necessary to accept any current theories about learning styles or metacognition to do this. The conversation can take place without buying in expensive questionnaires or subscribing to the latest fad.
- The use by that adult of research summaries as well as data to inform these conversations, so that they know how to manage the learning process for each individual. This does not contradict the previous point. You can reject whatever you find unconvincing, so long as you have thought about how learning actually works.
- A concept of learning that stresses the responsibility of the learner for their own development, then listens to its own propaganda by allowing the learner an active part in that process, helping them to understand how learning works in their individual case.
- An open attitude within the school or college that welcomes informed debate with and, if necessary, organises assistance from a number of other parties, including other schools and colleges, voluntary agencies, employers and parents.

What this means for the organisation of a school, college, curriculum or lesson depends on who you are teaching and how you normally do it at the moment. But it is not is not something you bolt on, apply, mug up on or pay lip service to. In essence, it is really something you are. Or are willing to become.

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