

Personalised Learning: Personalised Schooling

Derek Wise, Head of Cramlington Community High School,
Northumberland

Its 7 am and John wakes up to the sound of his hi-fi playing his favourite track through his Philips Streamium wireless media box which accesses the music stored downstairs on the living room computer. Wiping the sleep from his eyes, John studies his face in his dressing table mirror which, at the press of a button doubles as a computer screen and television. A red laser light marks out the letters of a computer keyboard onto the dressing table surface and infra red sensors work out what John is typing. John uses the computer to turn on the central heating and his shower. Once downstairs he orders the food for his 16th birthday over the internet via the "kitchen shopper" which reads John's scribbled notes from his tablet PC(1).

Once out of the house John catches the bus to Humdrum High School where he is in the final year of studying for his GCSEs. At Humdrum High all the lessons are 50 or 100 minutes long whatever the subject and the vast majority take place in egg box like classrooms. Knowledge is centred on both the teacher and the curriculum. John is dependent on others in terms of what should be learnt, how it should be learnt, where it should be learnt and the pace and conditions of learning.

Contrast John's control over his home environment with school where the control over Time, Place, Power Space and Pace reside elsewhere. We don't need terms like personalised learning to tell us we need to change our schools. Its obvious that they are in danger of becoming an anachronism. However, personalised learning or personalisation is useful because it points the way forward. All across the public services, particularly health and social care, personalisation is the rallying call for change. And its about time we started to take it seriously in education.

If you ask the students, they will soon tell you that whether we like it or not we are in charge of institutions. Comparisons of school experience in France, Denmark and England found that English children enjoyed school and lessons the least, were most likely to want to leave as soon as they could and felt that the school got in the way of their lives. Writing to the Guardian newspaper in 2000, a student commented that he no longer

wished to be treated like "herds of identical animals waiting to be civilised before we are let loose on the world". Others compared schools to "giant magnolia prisons". It was clear what they did want - light colourful classrooms, a school which listened to them where their opinions mattered, a school without a rigid timetable without a one size fits all curriculum and where they could learn through experience, experiments and exploration including going outside to learn. One way of summing all of this up is to conclude that they wanted schools to become more personalised, a "home from home". So its clear that we need, at least as far as our students are concerned, to make schooling less institutionalised. Instead of fitting an individual student into a system - 20th century thinking - we need to create a system designed around the needs, aspirations and interests of individual students.

But what of personalised learning? What does that mean? Clearly, it must embrace the concept of anytime, anyplace, anywhere learning. A not unreasonable concept in our 24/7 society. It should also embrace the concept of "just in time learning" - what you need, when you need it. I think, however, that at its core, personalised learning means creating independent learners. This means developing in our students the skills, attitudes and dispositions that they need in order to learn well, whatever the conditions and without the help of a teacher. As Alvin Toffler perceptively said "the illiterates of the 21st century, will be those who don't know how to learn, unlearn and re-learn".

So what does all of this mean in practice? If our teachers are to personalise their teaching in the classroom they will need to have a much deeper appreciation of learning styles than is currently the case. There has been too much focus on VAK and Multiple Intelligences and insufficient consideration of the work of other theorists such as Kathleen Butler and Strong, Thomas, Perini and Silver in the United States. These colleagues link students learning styles to specific teaching strategies. For example, in their article in Educational Leadership (February 2004) Strong, Thomas, Perini and Silver identify a Learning Styles Inventory for maths and link this to favoured teaching strategies (table 1). They wisely suggest ways of using this information in practice.

Table 1

Learning Styles Inventory: Maths	
Style	Favoured Classroom Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Mastery Style</u>- step by step working • <u>Understanding Style</u> - searches for patterns, categories, reasons • <u>Interpersonal Style</u> - Learn through conversation, personal relationships and association • <u>Self Expressive Style</u> - visualise and create images and pursue multiple strategies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step by step demonstration and repetitive practice • Need emphasis on concepts and the reasoning behind mathematical operations • Co-operative learning, real life contexts and applications • Likes visualisation and exploration, investigation

"We generally develop preferences and strengths in one or two of these. We need to develop all four. If a student is struggling or needs an extra challenge however, we can personalise their learning e.g. a student with a penchant for creativity and imagination was challenged to create a metaphor, he chose digestion, to internalise the operation solving process".

This is a rich vein for future research. The best advocates for learning style analysis have always been cautious in its use. Barbara Prashnig from New Zealand suggests for example that knowledge of individual learning styles should be used when introducing a new and difficult concept. Another fruitful line of enquiry would be to personalise homework by allowing students to present their understanding of their work using their preferred teaming style.

If teachers are to find the time and space in a classroom setting to use a personalised approach, technology can come to their aid. In my own school lessons are collectively and collaboratively planned and put onto the intranet so they are instantly available together with their associated resources via the interactive whiteboard. We employ our own web designers to aid this process and we use an early finish on Wednesday afternoons - students go home at 2 pm whilst staff stay working in departments or training until 4.15 pm - to create the time for collaboration. Freed from having to plan in detail a lesson and collect together the associated resources teachers are encouraged to focus on

personalising the lesson using a detailed knowledge of the students and the way they learn. Targeted questioning and intervention personalises the experience for the student.

We also use the timetable in a flexible way to cater for individual needs and interests. For 6 weeks of the year we reconfigure timetable time to enable departments to have their students for whole days or half days. This leads to a new type of learning and an opportunity for students to start something and see it through to the end without the process being interrupted every 50 to 100 minutes.

Changing the time variable eases the way to change the place variable. Already 25% of our year 10 work off campus and there are growing opportunities for students to individually negotiate working from home on specially designed learning modules. In this scenario the school becomes the hub of learning, the "broker" of learning opportunities. Through negotiation with the student and his family we help to determine where the best learning opportunities exist for the young person to achieve his or her goals. Surely catering for individual learning styles, changing the time and place for learning and through negotiation opening up a rich choice in a "school without walls" is the essence of personalised learning? Well, no, important though it is, I believe we need to go further and provide students with the skills, habits, dispositions and attitudes they will need to continue learning throughout their lives.

Schools are very good at helping students learn more and therefore raise achievement. We are good at direct and explicit instruction, chunking the syllabus for them, providing revision classes and so on. We are also increasingly good at helping our students to learn better by allowing students to discover their individual learning styles and taking this into account when we teach by giving opportunities for co-operative and collaborative learning. But we have to go further and help our students become better learners by teaching them how they learn and therefore how to become more effective and independent learners. This will involve giving our students the opportunities to practice and refine metacognition strategies and to specifically develop the keys to effective learning which at Cramlington we can the 5Rs which we developed from the work of Alistair Smith (2) (Table 2).

Table 2

Table 2: The 5R's

- Developing a responsible learner
- Developing a resilient learner
- Developing a resourceful learner
- Developing a reflective learner
- Developing a reasoning learner

It will involve our students in more enquiry based work and project work. Here students will have more control over the pace of their learning. Already our "AS" and "A" level students spend 20% of their time in each subject studying independently on assignments and projects set by their teachers. We need to stop talking about the percentage of teaching time and start talking about the percentage of learning time.

Hand in hand with personalised learning we need to personalise the whole school environment. We must start treating our students as we would be expected to be treated as adults (Table 3).

Table 3

Table 3: Treated like Adults?

- Do your students have social areas they can unwind in?
- Do your students have supervised cloakrooms where they can leave their coats and bags?
- Would you use the toilets the school provides for the students?
- Are the toilets "bully free" zones?
- Do you provide your students with a confidential, personalised counselling service?

We need to look at the way we organise our schools so they feel more personal to our students. This could include for example, House systems with vertical tutor groups replacing year systems, the creation of "schools within schools" either through separate self contained blocks

housing upper/lower school students or creating career schools/interest schools for years 10 and 11. Here, for example, all students taking a particular career pathway would be grouped together in their own mini-school and their Maths and English courses would, through choice of topic, content and methodology be relevant to their vocational interest.

Above all we need to change learning environments. Too much money is being wasted on impressive facades and shopping mall type style schools which impress the public, please architects but do little to enhance the learning. We need to look specifically at the learning spaces within our schools and this doesn't just mean the size but also the furniture and equipment within those learning spaces. At Cramlington, for example, we created out of an old social block a 21st century learning environment consisting of 3 double size teaching rooms with a large central "breakout" area. We designed round tables for our rooms to house a "home team" of 4 students. Each table with a desktop computer for collaborative work and underneath each table 4 networked laptops for individual work.



The room is sufficiently large for the centre to be used for whole class teaching or circle time. The room is carpeted and painted in "cool blue". It feels spacious, doesn't look anything like a computer room though it bristles with IT equipment, is light and airy and, oh yes, the students love it. We did this internal design on our own without any architects involvement, hiring our own furniture makers to create what we wanted based on our analysis of the learning needs of our students and our desire to create independent learners.

The last thing we want is for the Government or indeed anyone else, to come up with a definition of personalised learning. It is a concept that is inspiring and potentially transformative. I have used this article to briefly explore what I think it means for my school. There are many other important features of personalisation that space precludes me from exploring. You will have different and quite possibly more innovative ideas.

Ultimately, my philosophy and why we have enthusiastically embraced personalisation is summed up by my favourite educational quotation:

"What we need is a metamorphosis in education. From the cocoon a butterfly should emerge. Improvement only gives us a faster caterpillar"

*B H Banathy in "Systematic Change:
Touchstones for the Future School
Edited by Patrick M Jenlink,
IRI/Skylighting,
Training and Publishing Inc (1995)*

Notes:

1. Every piece of technology mentioned in paragraph 1 is available. See article House of the Future Today in The Daily Telegraph of Friday 22 April 2005
2. Alistair Smith's new Learning How to Learn course partly written by teachers from Cramlington Community High School is available from the end of June. www.alite.co.uk

Derek Wise has been Head of Cramlington Community High School for 14 years. In 1999-2000 he was seconded for a year to Newcastle EAZ as Project Director. He is the co-author of two books, one which uses the school as a case study for the introduction of Accelerated Learning (2001) and the other, 'Accelerated Learning: A Users Guide' (2003).

Cramlington High School is a 13-18 High School of some 1600 students with a fully comprehensive intake. It is a Specialist Science School. It was described by OFSTED in 2001 as "A strikingly successful school" and "an exciting place to learn". It was highlighted as an outstanding school by HMCI and in 2003 was designated Leading Edge status. Its value added at KS4 puts it into the top 5% of schools nationwide.