Personalised Learning: Ambiguities in Theory and Practice

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Personalisation in the public services: theories and ambiguities

Personalisation is a contestable concept applied to the planning and delivery of public sector services in England. It was introduced into the policy arena following the publication of a paper from a think tank, Demos by Leadbeater (2003). The concept was at first misunderstood as the individualisation of services, but personalisation is a far more socially oriented idea. Leadbeater argued that personalisation could operate at five increasingly deeply structured levels. These were:

- Providing more customer friendly services;
- Giving people more say in navigating their way through services;
- Giving users more say over how money is spent;
- Users becoming co-designers and co-producers of services;
- Self organisation by individuals working with the support and advisory systems provided by professionals.

Leadbeater argued that personalisation could become as powerful an organising logic for re-shaping public sector services in the coming decade as privatisation had been in the 1980s and 1990s.

To illustrate the concept, he contrasted explanations for the 23% decline in deaths from heart disease in England between 1997 and 2002. On the one hand, medical professionals had improved the quality of cardiac services, and introduced statins and other technical improvements; on the other, citizens had adopted changes to their life style, giving up smoking, taking exercise, eating more healthy food etc. He argued that, 'Contained in this single story are two very different accounts of how the public good is created.' The first emphasises the role of the state and professionals, in providing more effective services.

> The public good goes up the more effective the state becomes in solving society's problems for it. The second account is that the public good – fewer people dying young from heart attacks – comes from millions of people making loosely connected decisions in society to change the way they live, which collectively produces a significant improvement in the public good. In this model, the state does not act upon society; it does not provide a service. Instead the state creates a platform or environment in which people take decisions about their lives in a different way. This is bottom-up, mass social innovation enabled by the state. (p.16).

Leadbeater argues that these two accounts may be constructed as complementary but they reflect very different assumptions about the role of users and professionals. The former assumes user dependency, whereas in the latter, users become co-producers of the good in question, having access to information and developing confidence to self-manage their health. The two approaches can contribute to the development of personalised public services, but, he argued, the approach chosen will determine the form such personalisation takes: providing better access and some limited voice about services (shallow personalisation), sustaining improvements in the existing systems; or, a more disruptive innovation in which users become 'designers and paymasters' of services (deep personalisation).

The deepest level would mean:

> self organisation: the public good emerging from within society, in part through the way that public policy shapes millions of individual decisions about how we exercise, eat, smoke, save for our pensions, read to our children, pay our taxes, and so on. Many of our biggest social challenges – reducing obesity and smoking, caring for people with chronic health conditions, promoting learning, creating safer communities – will only be met if we promote a mass social innovation within society: self organising capacity to meet demand, otherwise queues would just lengthen. (p. 49).

For the argument in this paper, deep personalisation is taken to mean either or both of the last two of Leadbeater's levels, and shallow personalisation the first three, the justification for this distinction being that the last two levels involve action by consumers, whereas the former three require merely that the state acts in a more efficient way to provide services to the consumer.

Under this model of deep personalisation, professionals become advisers and brokers of services, not providing the services themselves so much as helping clients generate pathways through the available range of provision that meet their particular needs. Some public services, (for example, emergency and accident treatment in hospitals, defence, police) Leadbeater accepts do not lend themselves easily to the participative concept of personalisation. But deep personalisation would be particularly appropriate in services which are face to face (e.g., social services, non-emergency health), or involve a long term relationship (e.g., treatment of chronic illness) or depend on direct engagement between professionals and users (e.g., much formal schooling). He cites research showing that self-management by diabetes sufferers was associated with fewer crises and less hospital treatment than those not self-managing.

At this stage, two critical ambiguities emerge in Leadbeater's argument. The first is whether the principal advantage is to the individual, (through the development of a more healthy life style for example) or to the state, through the consequential reduction of state funding for directly provided services, as illustrated in the diabetes example above. The second, is whether, under deep personalisation the assertion that the state ceases to provide direct services goes beyond rhetoric, since even in this model the state 'creates the platform', and funds the delivery of most of the professional services that become brokered and co-produced. Unless these activities are seen as merely transitional, they do not obviously reflect the bottom up mass innovation supposed to characterise deep personalisation

Personalisation and education

Leadbeater saw the application of personalisation to education, as particularly appropriate, drawing upon the concept of a 'script' to envisage how it might work. Children would be enabled to devise a

> greater repertoire of possible scripts for how their education would unfold. At core there would be a common script – the basic curriculum – but that script could branch out in many different ways, to have many different styles and endings. The foundation would be to encourage children, from an early age and across all backgrounds, to become more involved in making decisions about what they would like to learn and how. The more aware people are of what makes them want to learn, the more effective their learning is likely to

be, since… personalised learning allows individual interpretations of the goals and value of education. (p. 68-69).

The aim of personalisation in learning is not marketisation of education, so much as the promotion of self-realisation, with children constructed as active and responsible co-authors of their educational script. This would lead to students setting their own learning targets, adopting continuous self-assessment for learning and to the development of flexibility in learning beyond the school and outside traditional school hours. Such flexibility to learn out of school would not be an entitlement, but would depend on 'earned autonomy' achieved through students doing well, demonstrating self-motivation, and becoming more self-regulating. Schools and teachers would no longer prescribe the content and pace and control of the curriculum, but would form partnerships and networks with other schools and other agencies, so as to broaden the resources, and learning opportunities available to students; their role would be to broker students' access to them and to help them make informed choices about pathways through them.

However attractive in theory, this application of the deep personalisation model also rests on substantial ambiguities. As a matter of fact and law currently, it is not 'schools and teachers' who prescribe the content, pace and control of the curriculum, it is the state, with most estimates showing state prescription at least up to age 14, of 90% of what is an age-related curriculum. It is difficult to see how this degree of regulation of the curriculum, could allow individual interpretations of the goals and values of education. Even if it did, it would shatter the idea that education had a unifying function in society, to initiate the young into the common culture, as Lawton (1975) and others have argued. The second ambiguity is about earned autonomy, which will have to be demonstrated by pupils/students learning the state controlled, directly delivered and non-negotiable curriculum, which may reward self-motivation, but not self-regulation by pupils/students. Moreover, self-motivation and self-regulation, not to mention educational progress, however desirable intrinsically, are not equally distributed among different classes and cultures in English society, so to ambiguity is added the possibility of continuing, or even increased, educational disadvantage.

The force of the above point is explicitly acknowledged by Leadbeater, who sees the main obstacle to the development of personalisation to be cultural, intellectual and financial capital, with professional class parents being in a position to exploit the advantages of personalisation for the benefit of their own children. Personalisation therefore might increase the already large inequalities in educational provision and achievement, deriving from social and economic status. Leadbeater's answer to this is that public resources would need to be skewed toward the educationally disadvantaged families, with increased and intensive guidance and advocacy from professionals, and compensatory resource allocation, for example in information technology. 'With careful design personalised services need not widen inequalities. On the contrary, they could be most valuable for people most in need.' (p. 79).

This proposed solution to the inequality problem will be discussed more fully later in this paper, but at this point it is worth noting that 'not widening inequalities' is not the same as reducing them, and could be read as implying that personalisation does not embody an ambition to redress the sources of inequality in educational achievement or even educational provision.

More directly however, skewing resources in education to redress societal inequalities has had a long and dismal record of ineffectiveness, going back at least as far as the 1970s, with the educational priority areas and community education

movements that followed on the Plowden Report (1967). Indeed, it could be argued that what has started to reduce inequality in educational achievement is the direct delivery through interventionist national initiatives such as the literacy and numeracy strategies of more effective teaching technologies - the educational equivalent of statins. In contrast to the rest of Leadbeater's argument, the treatment of this crucial issue comes over as weak, and possibly naïve, in respect of its assumptions about the ease with which generation of agency in the most disadvantaged groups in society can be realised.

Despite these concerns, the term 'personalisation' appears to have attracted a substantial range of analyses since the Leadbeater paper. The Nuffield review of 14-19 provision (Hayward et al., 2005), the ESRC Teaching and Learning programme (Pollard & James, 2004), the NCSL special supplement (NCSL, 2004) and a government White Paper (DfES, 2005) make differentially effective attempts to analyse the term, though none refers to Leadbeater's work directly. Possibly for this reason, or possibly because the concept of personalisation has not yet been fully worked out, there is no explicit common definition across these papers. The Nuffield Review, whilst referring to the ESRC programme, worked (p. 49-50) with a concept stressing a specified pedagogy – encouraging cooperative learning, mentoring, valuing experiential learning, incorporating learners' personal and social experience, using ICT, providing individual support, - and allied this to the development of collaborative partnerships of providers to extend accessible choice for students. In respect of official encouragement for capturing student voice, the Nuffield Review was cautious, articulating a further ambiguity (p. 37):

> It is not clear for what purpose the 'learner's voice' is thought to be important: whether for understanding how to motivate students (to get them to take an interest in things which teachers or trainers think they should be interested in) or whether for shaping the very aims and purposes of learning. (p. 37)

Nevertheless, the Nuffield review's treatment came close to Leadbeater's conception of co-producing a public good, but was less explicit about the role of self-organisation represented in Leadbeater's deepest level.

The ESRC analysis (p. 5) drew upon a fivefold framework provided by the DfES (2004). This comprised:

- Assessment for Learning,
- Teaching and Learning strategies that stretch pupils,
- Curriculum entitlement and Choice,
- Student-centred Organisations, and,
- Partnership beyond the school.

The rationale for including these elements and not others is not made clear, though Assessment for Learning, which involves teachers and students jointly generating what best helps students learn and developing meta-cognitive judgments by students about their learning is part of the personalisation activity. Likewise partnerships beyond the school will be needed if schools are to act as brokers for wider pathways to learning that reflects student choice and is responsive to it.

The ESRC analysis, whilst supporting the principle of personalisation, also illustrated some specific problematic aspects from research programmes already in train. For example in respect of Assessment for Learning, it argued:

> Personalised learning is not a matter of tailoring curriculum, teaching and assessment to 'fit' the individual but is a question of developing social practices that enable people to become all that they are capable of becoming… (p. 6)

It is clear that this re-conceptualisation directly challenges the model in the White Paper, as will be shown below. However, it accords very closely with the pedagogy we found in classrooms, again as shown below.

In respect of consulting students in order to empower student voice the issues of equity and authenticity were raised: 'Does the consultation consist of questions that teachers think are important or questions that pupils think are important?' (p. 11)

This questioning of the purpose of generating student voice resonates with the Nuffield Review's concern on the issue.

The ESRC analysis also three more ambiguities, which it saw as arising in part from the rapid development of the concept, and in part from the 'lack of clarity' about the concept, according to the DfES itself. The first is whether lack of clarity could be constructed as an advantage since the ESRC analysis cites a paper from the DfES in 2004, to the effect that, 'Personalised Learning is an aspiration or a philosophy providing space within which others can operate.' The second issue was identified as the relationship between the component parts of the fivefold framework. 'Its logical and empirical base can be challenged. How are its components chosen and what do they involve? Committed educationalists within the DfES have been working on the factors which they hope will, if implemented appropriately, enhance learning outcomes and provide equity and excellence. But these conclusions are still a theory – a set of propositions.' (p. 23). Third there was the issue of the reception of the idea by the profession. 'The new concept of personalised learning is likely to generate scepticism in some circles. Does it represent genuine new thinking about how teaching and learning can most effectively take place?'. Noting the contrast between the learner-centred character of personalisation and the previous and current state-centred approaches to curriculum and assessment, the ESRC analysis doubts whether a 'simple switch' between the two modes can be achieved.

As with the Nuffield Review, the ESRC analysis has strong, though implicit, assumptions that are close to the Leadbeater concept, perhaps most strongly in respect of its emphasis on student voice, and the role that assessment for learning plays in helping learners understand how they learn most effectively, though there is little detailed treatment about the concept of co-production of knowledge, which is restricted to a brief comment on constructivism. It may be that taking the DfES fivefold framework, whatever its advantages for tying in the argument to current education policy developments, deflected the ESRC team's attention from the more generalised Leadbeater model, which is not restricted to education, and certainly not to the statutory period of schooling, since his examples include aspects of adult learning.

The special supplement from the NCSL offers a mix of small reports of practice in particular schools, and outlines of the idea of personalised learning. There is continuity with the DfES five-fold model analysed by the ESRC team, with particularly strong emphasis on the role of Assessment for Learning, and brokering learning through partnerships. This is probably because the supplement was produced in partnership with the DfES Innovation Unit, and has a contribution from its director.

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The most analytical contribution comes from Professor David Hopkins, head of the DfES Standards and Effectiveness Unit at the time:

> It's building schooling around the needs and aptitudes of individual pupils, shaping teaching around the way different youngsters learn. It's also about making sure that the talent of each pupil is supported and encouraged, and about personalising the school experience to enable pupils to focus on their learning… personalised learning has to be a system-wide achievement so that it impacts on every student in every school. (p. 7)

Hopkins goes on to stress the importance of pedagogic change, assessment for learning and, unlike the Nuffield and ESRC analyses, asserts that a whole school ethos and approach must be implemented. He sees these elements as implicated in delivering the government's commitment to 'excellence and equity' in education.

The supplement concludes with 23 bullet points for school leaders to help them putting the theory of personalisation into practice. Most focus on improving organisational understanding and efficiency, (e.g., 'exploit the opportunities of workforce reform to involve more adults in preparing for and assisting in learning'). Our assessment is that only 3 of the 23 are directly concerned with students actively generating their own understandings and knowledge as co-constructors with teachers. The supplement therefore can be interpreted as operating at the shallower end of personalisation, at least in its ideas about how personalisation can be put into practice. This may be a risk associated with any attempt to articulate theory into practice.

The 2005 White Paper gives particular attention to personalised learning, devoting a whole chapter to the topic. Unlike Nuffield and the ESRC however, there is very little to connect the text to the Leadbeater theorising. Indeed, the chapter is distinguished by its refusal to attempt to define conceptually what it understands by the term. There is descriptive rhetoric but no conceptualisation. For example:

> Personalisation is the key to tackling the persistent achievement gaps between different social and ethnic groups. It means a tailored education for every child and young person, that gives them strength in the basics, stretches their aspirations, and builds their life chances. (para 4.1)

> Personalisation is not new. Our best schools provide a tailored education which combines:
> - Extra small group or one to one tuition for those who need it not as a substitute for excellent whole class teaching, but as an integrated part of the child's learning
> - Opportunities for all children to get extra support and tuition in subjects they are interested in, as well as access to a range of opportunities beyond the school day, including weekend and holiday courses and online learning
> - Exciting whole class teaching, which gets the best from every child
> - Setting or grouping children of similar ability and attainment
> - A rich flexible and accessible curriculum and, for older pupils, one that allows them to mix academic and vocational learning
> - Innovative use of ICT, both in the classroom and linking the classroom with the home. (para 4.2)

> Most important of all, it means excellent, tailored whole class teaching with all the resources available from extra support staff to improved ICT being used to ensure that every pupil gets the education they need. (para 4.6)

> Central to personalised learning is schools' use of data to provide structured feedback to pupils and parents on their progress. (para 4.5)

Of course, the target audience for a White Paper might be thought to be somewhat different from those of the Nuffield Review and the ESRC, but nevertheless the lack of clarity in conceptualising personalised learning, and the absence of any sense of ambiguity or tentativeness in the White Paper treatment, contrasts with the two academic reviews.

Three other points need making about the assumptions in the White Paper. First, if anyone is going to be involved in co-producing knowledge it is the teachers and the parents, not the learners themselves. Second, there is almost no reference to student voice, and choice appears to be limited to 'allowing' older students to mix academic and vocational learning. Third, there is a strong role asserted for personalisation in tackling the persistent achievement gaps between different social and ethnic groups, but the White Paper interprets this primarily in the limited sense of improving attainment in English and Maths. It does not present the problem as having political, cultural and economic dimensions, as the Leadbeater analysis does.

Thus despite the known interest in the DfES in the Leadbeater model, the White Paper runs the risk of transmitting an image of personalisation in only the shallow sense of making the existing services provided in schools and other educational settings, more streamlined, more accessible and more efficient. There is very little sense of deep personalisation, in the sense of students and teachers as co-producers of educational knowledge, at least in relation to formal schooling.

Personalisation in the education of gifted and talented students: pedagogy as the co-production of knowledge.

Where deep personalisation of education can be envisaged most easily is with older and more able students (and also in the adult education/life long learning sector). We could hypothesise that deep personalisation as a model would be most realisable in the universities, and in schools/colleges providing education in the 16-19 age range, where student voice and student choice have high salience, given the range of providers in the education market place and the relatively high levels of ability and maturity in the students as consumers. It could be particularly applicable to those school students identified as gifted and talented, and it is worth examining how it might work for such students. If it can not be realised for these students it is difficult to see how it could be for younger, less mature or less able students. In this article, the focus is upon pedagogy, perhaps the most difficult component of personalised learning to envisage since, for obvious logistical reasons, 'tailoring' teaching can not mean individualised instruction, generally, other than in one to one tutorials. You can have a bespoke suit, even today, but bespoke learning in classes of twenty or more students is more difficult to realise, even were it thought desirable.

The teaching and learning sessions described below are from a leading edge sixth form college (for 1700 16-19 year olds) in a university city. The college is over-subscribed and attracts high attaining students including a large proportion of students identified as gifted and talented. The teaching in all subjects was assessed as outstanding by inspectors in the most recent report on the college by the Office for Standards in Education. The descriptions are from field notes made during direct

observation of the sessions. The interpretations of the purpose and practice of the pedagogy were discussed with the teachers concerned directly after the sessions, and they were in broad agreement with them.

The English surgery

The first session was a lunchtime 'surgery', voluntary for the students, who were preparing for advanced extension award in English, taken by Martina, the second in the English department. Twelve students, 3 boys and 9 girls were in the session, though, it being lunchtime, they were joined by two others some way some ten minutes after the start, and one girl left half way through. The session ran from 12.50 – 13.50, preceded by ten minutes of settling in, waiting for students to arrive, and individual conversations.

12.50 Martina distributes a previous examination paper, drawing attention to a specific task item relating to a definition of formalism in literature offered in an excerpt from a literary critic. She writes the definition on the whiteboard, and identifies three aspects to analyse the definition that she wants the students to use as a framework – Approach, Insights, and BUTS (reservations).

12.55 Martina sets paired/triad tasks and then visits each small group challenging individuals about their initial judgements, and they test out their responses on her. In five minutes she has worked with 6 individuals; in seven minutes she has worked with all of the students in the pairs/triads. The pace is fast and business-like, but unhurried; the teacher personality is quiet and unshowy.

13.03 She calls together the whole group to share ideas. Students readily offer ideas, she accepts what they say, and turns it back to other students to comment on, then adds her ideas to it. The discourse is characterised by a gradual and collective accumulation of ideas, incorporating a readiness to challenge and be challenged. For example, one student argues that, 'formalism as defined, implies that literature is special or superior. But why, what's the justification? Why are other kinds of writing, say journalism or non-literary texts, inferior? And it would exclude non-standard language.' This generates high level articulation of the problems associated with intrinsic and extrinsic judgements, and how authorial intention is to be understood. The exchange then explores the effect the social and historical context of a literary work has upon its interpretation, with one student instancing the way Shakespeare' vocabulary often meant something different in his time from now. 'What's more, 'argued another student, 'formalism implies a kind of stasis – that we have established all the criteria for literary excellence, that our criteria are not changing.' Throughout this section of the session the students challenge each other's ideas, the teacher challenges them, and they challenge the teacher, and through this iterative process ideas are shared and constructively built upon. All students are unselfconsciously on task

13.15 Martina sets a new task for pairs/triads. 'Can you come up with an example that would disprove his point? But we need specific examples.' The groups work together on this task, with Martina intervening to trigger clearer articulation of the examples and the argument that the examples disprove the critic's point. All students are on task.

13.27 There is whole class sharing of these ideas, again characterised by high order questioning by the students of each other and by students contributing to the ideas of their peers. Again all students engage with the task.

13.35 Martina draws this session to a close by setting an extension task as an assignment to be completed in preparation for the next surgery, a week later. 'Here is a new piece of text, which you need to read independently first of all. The task is: How does this new text take today's argument on. Give three examples from your reading. This will be the focal point for our discussion next time.'

13.40 -13.50 the session ends with guidance on completing the examination entry form.

The History lesson

The second teaching session was a Modern History lesson, taken by Peter, the head of the History department. There were twenty two 17 year old students, roughly equal numbers of boys and girls, in a fairly conventional, though cramped, arrangement of a U-shaped line of students, against two sides and the back wall of the room, with areas of the U shape filled in with other students, so that all were facing the teacher and most could see and talk to each other without turning round. The lesson lasted from 11.35-12.40 and focused on an analysis of the Nazi State. The description below does not reflect the highly charismatic, often extremely entertaining, sometimes hilarity-inducing classroom persona of the teacher.

11.35 Peter explains the materials the students will be needing and the topic. Sets in outline the homework for next week, reminding them that they will be preparing for an examination conditions test. He reminds them also that they have his email address and they can raise any issues or problems with him. He responds directly to two email queries he had had since the last lesson. Then he sets the first task. 'You've got three labels – they're in the materials, in the text. Polycratic, Feudal, Chaos. You have to produce the examples to support the case that Nazi state was polycratic, or Feudal or Chaotic.'

11.40 Peter sets the task for pairs or triads, with different groups required to analyse the argument for justifying different labels. He tests individual understandings before they work in their groups. 'OK what have you got to say about 'Feudal' ? One student problematises the label: 'Does it work at two levels – does it work for the state? Does it work for the people?   You might get different answers for each of those levels.' Peter elaborates on the answer for the rest of the class, raising the possibility that the answers they arrive at may be too complex for a single label, but the purpose of the task was to press that questioning of the task itself - 'Test the label to destruction!' 'The same with Polycratic – What's it mean and can it be applied to help us understand the nature of the Nazi state. One student explains what she understands by the label – different competing power groups – but has reservations about its appropriateness. 'I'm not sure that the state was polycratic, because all the power groups were dependent on Hitler's support. So it's probably Autocratic we need not Polycratic.' Peter says, 'So you've got reservations, very good you'll need to test them out in your group. Now Feudal – let me remind you of your Year 7 work at your secondary school – Barons. You'll all know what Feudalism is, won't you?' Then he sets them to work in pairs. All students are on task

12.00 Peter brings the class together to 'test out' the judgements the students have made, taking first the pairs who have worked on Feudal, then Chaos, then Polycratic. Student responses are tentatively expressed but the reasons for their judgement are clearly articulated. For example, one student said; 'I don't know if I'm right but I'll try. Under feudalism the barons were the top group under the monarch, but I'm not sure that applies to Nazi Germany. The power distribution amongst the various groups wasn't as straightforward. 'Yes', says Peter, but does the concept of feudalism help

explain the power distribution. You're only half way there I think.' What about Chaos? I think chaos is useful to explain the growth of anti-Semitism, argues one student.' Peter queries this: Is that chaos in the sense we have used earlier, and in the text? Well it would cause chaos! And it applies as well as the other two to explaining anti-semitism, answers the student.

The pace of these and later interactive sections of the lesson is very fast, requiring students and teacher to think on their feet. In a period of ten minutes Peter has involved 9 individual students, representing all but one of the pairs

12.10 Peter refers to the lecture given yesterday by a visiting Professor of Modern History developing his theory of the 'dual state.' Can we work that into our explanations?'

12.15 Peter poses the question to the whole class: 'OK you've heard ideas on all three labels. Which works best and why?' One student proposes: 'I wouldn't settle for any one idea, I'd want to use all three because they offer different like perspectives on the same state. Peter pushes the student to elaborate on her approach and then re-formulates it for the class as a whole.

12.20. Peter sets the individual students the task of writing down in note form the case for one, or some, or all the labels as explanations for the Nazi state. They all work on this task in silence until one student queries whether the 'Nazi state' is what they should be thinking about. Peter suggests that what he means is that it was such a unique state that they should be attempting to analyse the 'Hitler state' which might be a simpler way to analyse the system. He is challenged by a student who points out the reasons for using the Nazi state as developed in the text. She also argues that the discussion so far has ignored the role of the churches, which the text refers to. 'Alright, hold all those points in play and I'll need a little time to think through this, while you complete the task. But I'll retain the right to disagree with the book, and for that matter with you' Peter responds. The students settle back to the writing task, in silence.

12.30 Class still working in silence. Peter brings them together reminding them of the nature of the lesson, that is to analyse the Nazi state. 'We need two students to promote the case for a label as useful and the rest of the class to listen and evaluate it – that is weigh up the strength of the case being made. This is done for Chaos, with some students arguing that that label is the most useful, and others taking a more multi-layered model, drawing together arguments from the text, from their paired work, from the whole class discourse and from their note taking.

12.40 Lesson ends and students leave still talking about the arguments

Interpretation

These sessions illustrated the pedagogy involved if teachers have as their primary aim the co-construction of classroom knowledge in understandings, skills, and contestation of ideas; the teachers saw their role as helping students produce their ideas, and improve them by building upon their initial ideas, and subjecting them to the scrutiny of their peers and the teachers themselves. This collective learning in the classroom was extended by individual activity outside it, which would then be the basis for further collective learning in the next session.

The teachers identified four principal conditions for this kind of pedagogy. First they themselves needed very high levels of subject expertise, since they were not

engaged in individualising learning - letting individual students generate their own ideas, as might happen under some interpretations of 'progressivism' or 'student-centred' learning. Co-constructing knowledge can work only if the teacher has such a high level of subject expertise to bring to bear upon the students' ideas that s/he can respond authoritatively to their ideas and help take them further. Second the teachers could assume, because of the college's ethos and value system, high levels of on-task behaviour and student self-motivation. Participation in, and commitment to, learning was a given and illustrates the way whole school values influence pedagogy. Third, the value assumption that knowledge is tentative, contestable and revisable permeates the classroom pedagogy. This was not 'instruction' nor was it the 'whole class interactive teaching' promoted under the national literacy and numeracy initiatives, since the knowledge, skills, understandings and values being collectively generated are constructed tentatively; the objectives for the session are not cognitive outcomes specified in advance, so much as pedagogical processes to be adhered to. Finally, relationships were informal but courteous, but underlying the extent of informality was a very clear structure to the sessions, with the pace, direction and transition from one activity to another primarily controlled by the teacher.

Three other points arose from these sessions. First, they did not rely on high levels of information technology, the dominant mode of learning being spoken discourse – language for learning so to speak. Information technology played a strong role in personalising the out-of-class learning since the teachers and students used email to communicate about learning tasks set outside the class. Second, this pedagogy was being used in what was in effect a preparation for conventional unseen external examinations, which is often used as a justification for a much more transmission mode of teaching. Finally, it is sometimes implied that a particularly charismatic persona is needed to achieve good pace and challenge in classroom interaction. This was true in one case, where teacher charisma drove the classroom learning with liveliness and witty exchanges, but not in the other, where a quiet, authoritative and respected, but unshowy, teacher personality was outstandingly effective in creating and driving the learning. Power to teach (Robinson 2004) does not always, or necessarily require a drama queen in the classroom.

A final comment on these teaching sessions is fundamental to our understanding the pedagogy. The surface features (identifying the purposes, setting tasks in pairs, sharing views with the whole class, setting out-of-class tasks) are significant but much less important than the underlying values and aims of the teacher – in this case to engage with students in the co-production of classroom learning. In other subjects or in other sessions in these subjects, the surface features might not be there; the key to understanding the pedagogy is to understand what the teachers were trying to achieve.

Discussion

There are three principal points to raise about personalised pedagogy as illustrated above. First, personalisation is a collective activity, not and individualised one, but the collective frame leads to the individual developing her/his learning. The teacher, the student group and the individual student produce together the meanings and understandings that the individual achieves. It is also collective in another sense; the values and attitudes that teachers and students bring to learning is derived from, and embedded in, a collective organisational ethos.

Second, this pedagogy is not new. It is elsewhere called the transacted curriculum or constructivist learning. The characteristic of constructivist learning, which is derived from Vygotskian social theory, is that the teacher 'scaffolds' the learning of the

student; provides the structured support to enable the learners to construct knowledge for themselves. It has been one of the standard approaches taught in teacher training courses, but has frequently been derided as too theoretical. It is interesting to see its survival, and possibly its celebration and legitimisation, under the personalisation agenda.

Third, the sessions illustrated are in the field of the History and English Literature where a heavy emphasis is placed on developing knowledge as judgements and justification rather than knowledge as objective truth. The extent to which this pedagogy is generalisable across different subjects is open to question, and needs further research.

There are, finally, three problematic issues in considering how far this is generalisable. They relate to age, ability, and social background. It was argued earlier that the best case to illustrate personalised learning should be derived from investigating how it might work with the most able and mature students, and that, following Leadbeater's concern, social background might play a part, in the sense that high levels of cultural capital might be necessary because personalisation favoured those groups whose values and orientation were aligned with middle class socialisation. The students in the illustrations above were older, very able and largely from professional class families.

We have to be speculative at this stage but it is argued (e.g., Wells, 1991) that constructivist learning is effective with much younger students, and that is particularly appropriate for learning in primary schools and pre-school settings. So the age/maturity argument may not be valid. On the issue of ability, the pitch and cognitive demand is particularly relevant for very able students, but the question is whether the aim of co-producing knowledge in the classroom is appropriate for all ability levels. Following Bloom (1968), what seems a pre-requisite for effective this kind of co-productive learning is high performance in evaluating, synthesising and other forms of higher order thinking, so we could hypothesise that it might be difficult to implement this pedagogy in classes where such thinking is not habitual.

The social class issue is less clear cut. It has long been argued (Bernstein, 1971, 1973) that pedagogy, especially pedagogy dependent on spoken language, is skewed towards advantaging children from middle class family socialisation, though this has been contested by cultural relativists (e.g., Labov, 1970). It will be particularly important to research this issue further, since some studies in the USA suggest that a different pedagogy for low socio-economic students, which emphases rote learning and direct instruction, is needed in contrast to that which is effective with higher socioeconomic students (See Campbell et al, 2004 for a review of the field). However, Mortimore (1999) has argued that structure and direction in pedagogy need not imply a narrower curriculum.

Nevertheless addressing the relationship between poverty and learning is not merely a matter of pedagogy; at the very least, a working hypothesis that those most at risk from the implementation of deep personalisation in learning are students from those social groups least well equipped, in terms of their families' cultural and financial capital, to develop self-regulation in learning, and access to, choice over, and voice in, learning opportunities beyond the formal schooling. Nothing in Leadbetter, the White Paper or the NCSL document seriously examines how to resolve this problem, which is admittedly not created by the concept of deep personalisation, but may well be exacerbated by it. One approach being developed in England is the GOAL project at the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth at the University of Warwick. This is an intervention programme offering a combination of funding and mentoring to

provide access to wider schooling opportunities for disadvantaged gifted students. It resonates with the shallow aspects of the personalisation concept, (making the system more efficient, more customer-friendly, more navigable), but its effectiveness at delivering deep personalisation, is yet to be tested.

These macro-level concerns, however, are speculative and should be the focus of further research. What seems much more securely embedded in these teaching and learning sessions is the way in which, reflecting the view of Hopkins referred to earlier, the whole school values and whole school ethos feeds into the classroom behaviour of students and teachers. In this particular college, these values had been collectively developed, including development through the student council, the teachers and the governing body. They concerned values about learning behaviour, respecting differences in views, taking account of student voice, and the importance of self-motivation for learning. This set of values were the underpinning infra-structure of the personalised pedagogy, and without their influence on the attitudes and behaviour of teachers and students in classrooms, it is probable that the pedagogy would collapse.

Finally, we have demonstrated earlier the ambiguities in theorising personalisation in education. This lack of conceptual clarity, most obvious in the White Paper, is unfortunate, since the danger that personalisation will be implemented only in its shallower form in schooling is very real. It is easier to implement reforms that merely increase system efficiency, but much more difficult to implement the 'disruptive' innovation in role relationships between teacher and learner, envisaged by deep personalisation in Leadbetter's terms. In the end, what Leadbetter is arguing for is a radical change in the control of educational knowledge production, and bringing about such change will be hampered where the basic concept is fuzzily transmitted by the Department for Education and Skills, a government department not renowned over the last twenty years for its enthusiasm for relinquishing its control over curriculum pedagogy and assessment.

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