

Personalisation of Assessment: Issues



I viewed your portfolio with interest Simkins,
but we may need to discuss your understanding
of the term deconstruct...

some provocations for:

**DfES Riverbank Park Plaza event,
13/02/06**

Prof Stephen Heppell

All,

I've written this deliberately as a provocation piece, and included some relevant appendices. The last appendix ends with a comment by David Miliband about personalised assessment: "Conclusion: there is a lot to discuss. This is a challenging agenda for all of us. But I am fundamentally optimistic about English education." I'm sure we all agree with that (!) and the quote is a good place for us to start. If you are tight for time, read the issues (below) first. If you are REALLY tight for time (i.e. reading this on the tube on the way to the meeting) then read the summaries at the end of each issue. It's formatted in landscape for easy screen reading.

But if you have time over the weekend, I've aimed for a readable, journalese style, with then some specific Issues to make it easy for busy people to dip in and out before we meet. I should declare an interest: I absolutely believe, with a passion, that one of the most enduring barriers to the remarkable progress we have all seen children achieve through and with new technologies, is our current and enduring inability to use assessment to properly support the progression and continuity that their new learning deserves, or even to offer the celebration of excellence that they themselves deserve. Assessment should be the key that unlocks, accelerates, motivates and challenges our young learners, whilst supporting their teachers in the enormous research task of knowing just how good they might be. At its best it might carry parents along with the excitement too, and throw enough aggregates to policy makers to make their lives tolerable, and their decisions robust, too.

Currently though, despite many good intentions, our one-size-fits-all assessment models seem to only offer convenience for our institutions and administration, whilst capping the ambition of learners and teachers alike. In the motorway of progress that our best schools, best teachers and best learners are embarked on, assessment is at best a chicane, at worst a bottleneck that brings them all completely to a halt. That won't do, will it? And of course the personalisation agenda has simply amplified the problems that assessment faces.

I'm lucky enough to rush around the world advising governments and corporations. Everywhere, from Brazil to Brunei, from Bangkok to Basildon, there is a hunger for a suite of 21st century assessments that take us forward and address the challenge of personalisation. I obsessively believe that the UK could and should meet that need and could be a key fulcrum in the complex world of global learning that the 21st century will become. Or we could wait for someone else to do it. The choices are only to lead, follow or fail. It is that stark.

Personally, I think we should lead.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Stephen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Prof. Stephen Heppell

Context

Luckily, we are in the 21st century already, and things this side of the millennium are very different from the last one. Today, already past the halfway mark of the first decade of this new century, we live in a policy era where mercifully "every child matters" and where ministers speak openly, with understanding, of personalisation and of a learner centric world. We also live in a century which technology, in its broadest sense, has made very different from the previous one. This should all amount to real opportunity for all.

20th century: building big things that did things for people.

In the 20th century the big success stories were characterised by "large scale provision, which did things FOR people": the BBC made programmes and we watched; buyers selected Marks and Spencer, who clothed them from head to toe; Ford started the century making cars "any colour you like, as long as it's black" and ended it producing "world cars" like the Mondeo.

It was a century of mass production, couch-potatoes, and one size fits all. The relationship between producers and consumers was not at all symmetrical. Consumers chose, producers designed and produced. It was all very one way. Productivity dictated processes and products rather than individual contexts, cultures or pre-dispositions. If you wanted the sporty engine, with the family friendly seats, a sunroof AND air conditioning in your car it was just hard luck. Although these parts all existed, that combination simply wasn't on offer. Choice was expensive, customisation a hobby. Non standard behaviours, from

dress to dance, were characterised as "individual" which as a word was used to mean something quite closed to eccentric: "He certainly had an individual clothes sense".

We stopped cutting butter and cheese to personal preference and sold it in standard pre-packaged chunks, with standard weights. Doubtless, it all seemed very modern.

This would already have been an unlikely enough century to pursue an agenda of personalisation in learning, but there were two further unhelpful factors too:

- mostly, for the second half of the century, we had too many children. The shock of the baby boom in the fifties, peaking again in the mid sixties, meant that the primary problem was simply processing numbers. There was no time for the luxury of personalisation surely; at one point in the 70s we built a new school every day and desperately tried to find enough teachers for their enormous, packed, classes.
- And secondly, our major employers, from manufacturing to services, from Fords to Lloyds did not seek diversity in their workforce. They wanted a standard worker, happy to move when the whistle blew, choreographed by Time-and-Motion, and meshing into the desegregated jobs of specialised large scale enterprises;

You can see why we had the assessment system we did; it fitted.

21st century: helping people to help each other

Well, that was then and this is now. An explosion of new communication technologies have changed the world for ever. The 21st century is one of symmetry. These new technologies have given us all a voice and a hunger for that voice to be heard. All the 21st century success stories are about "helping people to help each other", from Talking Heads and Teachers' TV, to eBay and Google.

We ignore that supercharged combination of Choice and Voice at our peril. Indeed arguably you can watch Google slipping back from it's roots helping people to help each other and mistakenly becoming a 20th century 'big thing that does things for people" Arguably, a loss of \$16 billion from its share price this week is testament to the error of that loss of direction!

Choice and Voice express themselves in many ways: the BBC breakfast news devotes substantial time to e-mails and txts from viewers; a host of programmes from ballroom dancing to ritual humiliation rely on colossal numbers of votes to determine their direction; computers are specified on-line by the buyer before they are built; travellers book cheap flights directly, searching the web for the itinerary that suits them best; we shop around for our clothes, as Marks and Spencer's share price testifies. It is a personalised world.

Interestingly whilst that personalisation trend has been evolving in our consumption lives. For example consider the rating mechanisms on Amazon, or eBay, our learning lives have also begun to properly take account of the diversity of contexts, predispositions, cultures and aptitudes that characterise our diverse learners.

Although personalisation (Summerhill et al), emotional and multiple intelligences, personal records of achievement (REACH), portfolios, locally versioned examinations (Mode 3 CSEs), cultural awareness and the like existed well back into the last century, their time has come now for three reasons:

- a) the new technologies above have enabled us to respond to them in a cost effective way AND have built a sense of entitlement that we might respond;
- b) the new economy of the 21st century needs diverse, ingenious, creative, collaborative, communicative workers who can critique as they create. One-size-fits all does even fit the economy any more. The standardised, conformity based jobs have all gone abroad, or are done by robots;
- c) personalisation in learning works rather startlingly well and ministers have noticed!

All of which leaves us with the rather thorny question of "how on earth do we measure it? celebrate it? progress it? and be ambitious enough for it?

But that's where you come in...

So what then are the BIG issues in Personalising Assessment?

(1) It's a global world:

The UK has a long tradition of exported accreditation. The "Cambridge" exams still have a currency in much of the world that we formerly colonised. But there is a huge dissatisfaction with them and a general migration to alternatives. The International Baccalaureate is eating into the International Schools market rapidly for example. Our international offerings have moved even slower in response to a personalised agenda than our domestic ones. Mistakenly thinking that the gold standard of A and O levels was bankable we have frozen our international offerings and they quite obviously won't do. It is patronising to think otherwise.

And the world is clearly embarking on a pathway that will allow schools, families, regions to "shop around" for the components that offer them their ideal assessment curriculum. A flavouring of ECDL with a little Cisco and Microsoft in technology, the IB project work, some details from the RSA, a pinch of Tasmania's primary Essential Learnings, distance degrees from Carnegie Mellon and the OU, and so on. At the moment, rather like the Catholic church, we offer all or nothing. Personalisation is for regions too! Our lives are global, assessment must be as well; some argue that that presents a much bigger challenge for personalisation, but with already hundreds of languages and cultures in London schools alone we need to think global anyway.

Issue 1 then is:

How do we retain a significant role in a world of global, component choice in assessment, offering on the one hand support for local cultures and contexts, but on the other hand the confidence of a quality system backed by a century of experience? And how do we do all this in a way that genuinely responds to a dialogue with learners about their personal assessment needs. Tricky.

(2) Personalised is not individualised:

Collaboration matters. Responding to the needs of learners means responding to their need for collaborative learning. Our assessment models have always been, largely, focussed on the individual and yet, all around the world, it is widely understood that collaboration is central to new learning. For example I met with one of China's senior policy makers last week and he said, amongst other things, this:

"We need cooperation and team spirit. Modern society does not rely on individuals... we need teams of people to work together. We have seen clearly that through cooperative learning they become more motivated.. and of course they learn better. This is not just a method for learning and assessment.. it's about how you live your life"

And within that collaborative, cooperating group what role should each individual take? Within a personalised agenda it would be wholly appropriate for them to contribute in a way dictated by their learning styles and aptitudes; but does this make for a complete and fulfilled learner, or a too-early-specialised one?

Issue 2 then is:

In a world of collaborative and cooperative learning, how do we build assessment systems that respond to the personal needs, styles and predispositions of the individual when they are learning as part of a team most of the time. How do we assess their contribution would be difficult enough, but how do we decide what is an appropriate contribution is even more difficult.

(3) Just what is technology's role?:

The trouble with technology is that we can do the wrong things so much better than it is easy to start thinking we are doing the right things. A lot of the way that we have harnessed technology for assessment has been to reduce the burden of work, and the costs of that burden, to the education system. Wouldn't it be great if we could electronically read and mark essays? would it be good if kids could do multiple choice tests on screen, without paper, and so on.

Obviously it wouldn't if the essay, or the multiple choice test were inappropriate tools for assessment.

In the US a philosophy of "No child left behind" has become a regime of insane over-testing, with technology as bully. Even small-town dailies like the Daily Southtown newspaper comments:

"Imagine a man stocking a farm pond with newly hatched trout and then, in six months, trying to catch a trophy-sized trout there with a fly rod. Imagine, next, this "fisherman" trying to determine why his trophy hunt was a failure by repeatedly electro-shocking the pond to see what floats to the surface, and in the process, stressing to death the weakest of the trout fingerlings".

The issue for personalised assessment is twofold. On the one hand technology has offered a host of new opportunities for learners to represent their particular learning styles and diverse capabilities; the new ways to construct, deconstruct and critique range from video and audio, through to presentations and on-line community engagement. These need to be represented within the portfolio of assessment opportunities, and that isn't easy.

On the other hand looking back to previous attempts to represent student performance (the bulging files of the "Records of Achievement" initiative (REACH) spring to mind), it is clear that the task of representing performance was so vast that it BECAME the performance (!) and yet today's technology can build portfolios on-the-fly that really do represent a breadth of student outcomes without deflecting the student from those outcomes.

There is also the pivotal issue of identity: only technology can solve the problem of knowing just who the learner is and of mapping their identity and performance. But we do not have a proper relationship between the Unique pupil reference number, examination candidate numbers, daily school registration, or identity. It is very hard to see how we can proceed towards personalised assessment if we don't properly know who the person is.

Issue 3 then is:

We need a clearer vision of the shape and nature of future personalised assessments, so that we can guide technology towards supporting that vision. It is too easy in the vacuum formed without that vision to focus technology on improving the wrong approach altogether. How do we stop this, and refocus?

(4) When is an appropriate TIME for assessment, or for learning tasks in general?:

Looking around the world a clear trend is emerging: a blurring of the "appropriate" age for levels of study. Piaget is on the way out, Vygotsky is on the way in. Children have broken out of the box that said "you can't do that until you are 16" and hurrah to that. Given that even Piaget recanted at the end of his life you might say "about time too!".

However this trend sees children at, for example, the Australian School of Maths and Science sitting in, as an expectation, on university level modules from 11 years upwards, and on our side of the planet it sees a significant increase in the entry by school aged pupils to the OU's degree level modules.

Obviously a personalised learning agenda applauds this if it meets learners needs and desires, but it does throw yet another curved ball at assessment. Building and aggregating a portfolio of learners' performances is tricky enough but when the spread of both aptitude and goals are as wide as this it just gets harder. Imagine a 17 year old arriving for an interview at Imperial College with a portfolio that represents their progress include some undergraduate work, in collaboration with some 20 years plus students, done at a distance with an American university and you get the picture. What won't be acceptable in a world of personalised learning will be for Imperial to undervalue that assessed work.

This is not news to anyone of course. The 2005 NAHT annual conference had a theme running through it of: "Personalised Assessment: the challenges for external exam bodies of assessment by stage rather

than age, and the implications of Personalised Learning."

We just don't have many answers yet.

Issue 4 then is:

Personalisation means not locking children into an age phase, but that age phase is at the heart of much of our organisation, not only in assessments, but in learning in general. How do we progress, we can't move one brick in the wall without rebuilding the whole wall.

(5) What do we store and show?

With the old Dick Turpin model of learning ("Stand and Deliver!") we simply showed the students past model answers. They asked "Is it on the exam paper" as a judgement of relevance. This was simple enough, and initiatives like the BBC's excellent Byte Size have shown just how effective support can be when the task is as limited as much of our current curriculum.

The World Bank's useful document "Transforming Learning" identifies a whole new model for lifelong learning including the view that:

"Assessment is used to guide learning strategies and identify pathways for future learning" which is a very different challenge from simply replicating what went on in the past.

Thus, in this new world of personalised learning we face two more problems:

- The outputs by each student will, subject to some collaborative sharing, be different because they are personalised. This makes the job of showing past efforts to guide current ones more complex.
- But secondly countries are moving down a personalised learning route because it offers substantial gains in performance, year on year. Increasingly criterion referenced assessment is seen as trapping students in the limits of previous years' performances and we know that, just as at the Olympics, year on year performances should improve substantially, if we are to keep up. Indeed as we add technology to learning we might expect to see very, very substantial gains annually. If you have a moment before the event

next week, type "buy essay on-line" into Google and you will see that students are already well versed in the doctrine of helping people to help themselves! Unless we can advance the tasks annually the whole system faces ridicule.

Issue 5 then is:

What do we show today's students of the work done by previous students? Is any of it relevant to tomorrow's students? Of course this is all far simpler in a world where students own and manage their own portfolio, and can annotate, narrate and reference each others. Ipsative referenced work will be valuable, where criterion referenced work is limiting. The 21st century mantra "helping people to help themselves" should move us forward here in a way that is efficient for everyone's time, and agile enough to respond to personalised needs.

(6) Where is the student voice?

It doesn't matter whether we are looking at the design of school buildings or the use of music in the classroom, listening to the authentic voice of learners does two things well: it helps us to build better, more personalised, learning, but it also triggers a meta-level reflection in our learners. They think about their learning and as a result they perform better.

A host of work, from SchoolWorks to Joinedupdesignforschools in the UK and plenty more besides worldwide confirms how important this is. For example the New York school district's 10 principles for effective school design include:

"Student participation: characterized by the influence of student voice" in classroom teaching and learning, the engagement of students in their own learning, and significant student responsibility in the the operation and governance of the school".

There is, for once, a very clear global consensus that hearing the learner's voice makes learning more personalised and improves learning. It would be stubbornness to assume that this didn't extend to assessment too.

In the 21st century we don't hear the students' voices through a representative "student council", we hear it through the channels that technology has brought us: texts, podcasts, diaries and blogs, conversations and more.

Issue 6 then is:

How do we harness effectively that student voice, without it becoming burdensome to listen? One obvious way of course is to make that voiced meta-reflection about learning a requirement of student assessment.

Finally:

(7) If teachers are learners too, where is the personalisation of their learning?:

One thing is certain in all this: we won't build a population of learning professionals who really understand the role and effectiveness of personalisation unless it characterises their own learning, both pre-service and ongoing. Arguably, some CPD has moved well towards an agenda of personalisation, within the needs of institutions, but initial training has some very considerable distance to go.

Issue 7 then is:

Simple really, personalisation and personalised assessment is for all learners, teachers too. Well, nobody ever said this was going to be easy...

Appendix 1:

David Miliband chats to teachers about personalisation: two extracts

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/personalisedlearning/qandas/>

Jane Dyer: What plans are there in place and to be developed, in initial teacher training and teacher development to spread and, more importantly, embed and monitor best practices and tailoring teaching? I fully endorse personalised learning and agree its roots are definitely in the best practices of the teaching profession and about tailoring learning and teaching so as to ensure that every child or young person reaches the highest possible standards. My adopted son who has emotional and behavioural difficulties associated with early years neglect at his mainstream school finds it very difficult to tailor teaching to enable him to access the curriculum to his potential.

David Miliband: Thank you for your support. I have been very encouraged by the way the TTA, teacher training institutions, and schools which are bases for teacher training, have responded to the personalised learning agenda. Of course, this is not just about initial teacher training, but CPD, and I anticipate that the diverse repertoire of teaching styles required of the modern teacher will be an increasingly important part of the school system. In addition, workforce reform is key to making all this possible.

Harriet: If you want us to transform learning through personalisation you have to have the nerve to really push assessment, because, if you believe in the fundamental values of personalisation and in our capacity to bring about change then 'personalised assessment' is an inevitable and logical outcome.

David Miliband: Personalised assessment is important, if by that you mean assessment for learning. But assessment for learning is enhanced, in my view, when it takes place within the context of independent, objective, national, recognised levels of achievement, and rich data on how different schools and different pupils are performing against those benchmarks. We have to beware that the laudable aim of helping every youngster learn at a pace suitable for them does not become a route to lower expectations being visited on different children. I know from my own constituency how important it is, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, that their teachers instil in them the highest possible aspirations.

Appendix 2:

Notschool, the DfES funded virtual school for students excluded from mainstream school by circumstances or behaviour, has a long history of a fully personalised approach to learning, and there is much to learn from it. Notschool are assembling a number of indicative studies of students who could gain from a fully portfolio based, personalised approach to assessment.

Achievement is categorised under a number of broad "pillars".

These two sample case studies (from a longer set) indicate how a personal portfolio might contribute where the current provision doesn't. bear in mind that both these children were excluded from school long term (4 years and 3 years respectively), and yet went on to successfully re-engage with learning through Notschool:

Case Study 1: Joe

Joe was 15 years of age. He attended "school" part time and had a placement at a hairdressing salon 2 days a week.

He has to write a work experience diary but he has decided to take this further as he wants a career in hairdressing.

He has researched job roles, health and safety, effective communications, hair care, hair styles and hair care products. He is currently working on the business model of his work placement as he intends to run his own salon eventually.

He hopes to obtain a college placement next year, and is putting together a CV, and an e-portfolio with short movies included, to demonstrate his skills.

He uses IT to show customers in the salon where he works potential cuts and styles. He likes to experiment with hair styles. He takes digital pictures of himself and his friends on his mobile phone, downloads to computer where he can experiment with colour and style.

Active investigation: Joe has investigated the financial and business aspects of running a salon, including health and safety

Joe has researched a range of hair products

Creative Contribution: Joe has experimented with a range of hair styles and colours

Reflective Learner: Joe's work experience diary evidences his increasing ability to be a reflective learner

Confident collaborator: Joe evidences team work and collaborative skills at the hairdressers with both colleagues and clients.

Practical self manager: Joe has made his own decisions about finding out as much as he can about becoming a hairdresser and eventually setting up his own business.

Case Study 2: Jenny

Jenny was 14 years of age and enjoyed creative writing. She had written a number of short pieces and decided to embark on a more ambitious project by writing a short novel.

During her summer holidays, she had spent some time helping out at a local riding stable. She developed the novel over an entire year, developing her work based on the characters of the ponies.

Her teacher had seen her work regularly over the year and was impressed by the detail and quality of her work, and the reflection, research and collaboration surrounding it. She recognised that Jenny had used a range of skills which could be identified as:

Active investigation: Jenny had used her work experience at the stables to become appropriately aware of relevant animal behaviour

Jenny had read a range of stories including a number of books about horses, ponies and their care and welfare

Creative Contribution: Jenny had written a piece of very extended creative writing

Jenny had produced a number of pieces of artwork in photoshop, to support her story.

Reflective Learner: Jenny had ongoing advice and feedback from her teacher and much of that was to do with the technical aspects of writing such as spelling, punctuation and grammar. She was able to demonstrate here ability as a reflective learner by reviewing and

modifying her work in the light of these comments.

Confident collaborator: Jenny collaborated with her teacher who put himself in the role of the editor of a publishing company. She also emailed her work to some of her friends who read her story and made suggestions. She incorporated some of these changes where she felt they added to the story.

Practical self manager: Jenny had made the decision to write and illustrate the story. Over a 12 month period, she had researched, reviewed and developed and completed her story presenting it as a final illustrated novel which she desk top published herself, having explored design issues in some detail.

Appendix 3:

David Miliband, Then the schools minister, to the Secondary Heads Association's conference in London, July 1, 2003

"I need you to help me guarantee for today's students awards that are of value and creditability. And I need you to help chart the future by developing cooperation across the traditional divide of academic and vocational study. SHA has played an important role in reform to date. And I look forward to your input into future debates.

There is one prerequisite for this sort of offer to be possible. We need secondary schools to embrace personalised assessment and the development of personal learning. Ofsted report that currently 40% of schools have taken up Assessment for learning. We need it to be 100%.

We need 100% of pupils to get the benefit of careful assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. We need 100% of teachers to engage in structured and collegiate discussion and development of appropriate learning opportunities for different groups of pupils. And we need 100% of schools to treat every student as an individual."

Conclusion: there is a lot to discuss. This is a challenging agenda for all of us. But I am fundamentally optimistic about English education."