



she says she has personalised learning and personalised assessment already, so why can't she have a personalised interpretation of a tidy bedroom?

## Personalisation of Assessment:

### notes from the day

some feedback from:

DfES Riverbank Park Plaza event,  
13/02/06

Prof Stephen Heppell

cartoons: Tom Smith

All,

The notes below summarise our discussion well, I hope.

I have stressed much, from my notes and from Lys', including the optimism that characterised our discussion.

I've been bold enough to extract an action list from the rather rushed conclusion of our valuable debate, which was chock full of your wisdoms.

What is less clear in the notes is that the optimism was for learning and assessment and not necessarily for **UK** learning and assessment! There was a warm feeling that personalised learning and personalised assessment would be the future regardless, but that learners might have to look elsewhere for it if we didn't get our act together quickly enough.

I think I said in the briefing notes that we really only face three options; to fail, to follow or to lead. I think what came out of the discussion was a view that having done so much, and having made such good progress with ICT, then here was an area where we most certainly should, and could, lead.

Personally, I agree.

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

Prof. Stephen Heppell

## Issues

...from the pre-event reading we were faced with 7 major issues and these structured our break-out session, initially:

### **Issue 1 was:**

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.

### **Issue 2 was:**

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.

### **Issue 3 was:**

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?

### **Issue 4 was:**

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.

### **Issue 5 was:**

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.

### **Issue 6 was:**

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.

### **Issue 7 was:**

Simple really, personalisation and personalised assessment is for all learners, teachers too. CPD needs personalised assessment too.

Well, as we agreed, nobody ever said this was going to be easy.

## Discussion

The issues were generally welcomed and embraced. We discussed them. Encouragingly, this was not a group of "yes, buts...", it was a group who saw the confluence of personalisation, new technology, interested ministers, 21st century change, and more, as an opportunity.

An important over-arching comment on the whole discussion of that opportunity was of the **unanimous** optimism that pervaded our whole session. Things can only get better! and they will.

## Content and portfolios

Beyond the 7 issues, we wandered into **Content**. Was this about content? Well, yes, very much so, using a definition of content as a **product of learning** rather than an infrastructure. Our debate warmly embraced **user generated content, portfolio** based assessments and a **narrative** of the individual, or groups, learning journey, or the **milestones** on that journey. This was a vision of symmetry where the learners contributed, learner from and with each other, and built on the shoulders of predecessors.

A huge bonus for the portfolio approach is that ICT already carries and stores much of the learners outputs - the work is only in **archiving** and perhaps **narrating** those outputs.

Is this an area for the dfES, or should the Department stand back?  
Again a unanimous "yes" to the Department's role.

There was a very clear view, again consensual, that technology was both a key **enabler** of new personalised assessments and a key **catalyst**. ICT meant that we **couldn't keep doing the same old things** and attain high standards. We had to change. ICT gave us the **means for change**.

We moved to explore the issues with more care - a clear view was that in a **lifelong learning** world we should simply speak of **learners** and not age-phase them by using "children".

## Moving forwards

But for many adults there were scars from past assessments - bad, painful experiences of **failure, humiliation, despair**. For them the process of learning, when it came to a point of assessment, was always tainted by these **negative** past experiences. There is an opportunity here for not just a new approach, but for **an inclusive new approach** because the "new" might include a wholly **new vocabulary**.

To underpin that a new philosophy was needed: **inclusive** and **ambitious**, rather than exclusive and under-ambitious. This led us, inevitably to an exploration of the often observed mismatch between what employers want and what learners need - often because employers see a "here and now" need, where learners, and perhaps hopefully governments, have a view more rooted in future needs:

An employer might want a plumber who can solder and bend pipes right now, but an employee can see that a proper grasp of

plumbing will soon require some complex ICT skills and wants to begin that learning pathway now.

Some of the solution to this may lie in the overlap between **appraisal** and **personal learning portfolios** - because both are based on a time continuum rather than just a snapshot.

A key are explored was the extent to which we are, or certainly should be, preparing people to be adaptable - to move between disciplines and domains. certainly the significant trend towards project based learning is at the heart of that, but **personalised assessment** must guard against being too closely confined in "discipline" boxes like Chemistry or History, where overlap between **traditional** disciplines is clearly both useful and effective.

One thought that was interjected: are schools the wrong place to focus on anyway in a lifelong learning world? The view of the group was "no" we **do** need schools, and we need to give them the confidence and freedom to take risks... the general group view was that, perhaps surprisingly, the White Paper doesn't do this.

## Optimism

A big reason for the **optimism in the group** was that everyone was clear, from first hand experience (and we had experience in spades in the group), that **most young people have something in their lives they want to achieve**... so that we are very much pushing against what would be an open door if we hadn't slammed it with inappropriate assessments first.

Central to the thinking as we evolve personalised assessment should be "**how do I support achievement everywhere**" rather than how "how do I assess outputs from school"...

## Concerns

What was described by one, but echoed by many, as a **huge disappointment** was the lack of input or reference from overseas or other countries' work. The pre-debate document picked up well the **global dimension** of all this, but the feeling was that many should / must be engaged in the same debate and our only real hope was to all work together on a way forward. **Learning is now global** was a very clear message from the group.

There was a strong rejection of the old Piagetian model of horizontal structures where children's progress is limited by their "year group" or "Age Phase". To a general warmness for much of Mike Tomlinson's report the group added a very clear dimension that children, and indeed all learners should be limited only by ambition. if they wanted to embark on undergraduate work at school, why shouldn't they... and this was built on a very clear judgement that it is the current one-size-fits-all assessment model that stands in the way of this progress.

## Pragmatics

The group then explored the possibilities for assessment innovation - where were **the points of give**, of least resistance? Inevitably it was

**those for whom the current system has completely failed:** adult learners who could find no way back; children (like the **Notschool** learners) who have fallen through all the safety nets; new migrants with excellent potential capabilities but poor English; and so on. By innovating with those who are really at the margins of the system, using new approaches to **REALLY accelerate their learning**, it was hoped that the traditional system would be "shamed" into better progress too. And then a new group would fall to the margins.. we work with them.. and so on.

An almost consensus view emerged (only one dissenting) that 14-18 and adult ed. provided the most fruitful avenues for the kinds of radical progress that are needed.

Another emergent trail of thought explored the outputs from personalised learning - they might be very different from the outputs we have traditionally valued: better health was one example. A lot of personalised learning might be about developing the necessary strategies for understanding organisational and individual learning needs or evolving quality assured processes for self assessing.

A strong theme emerged of not being formulaic in approach - the incremental approach has **not delivered the agility or pace** of change needed. Where is the Google or eBay like version of UCAS? Where is the **proper analysis of the difference that technology has made** to broadcasting, media, design, communications, retail, etc., and an **analogue comparison** of the difference it **should be making** to assessment?

## A learner voice

This was highlighted throughout the session as centrally important. So much work on the design of learning stresses the value of the learners' voice, both to **better inform the decision making** and to gain those **meta-level reflection learning accelerators** that are so well documented. How could assessment proceed without that authentic learners' voice guiding its developments.

but more than that, the voice of the learner should be an **accredited part of the learning process**. Learners learn, reflect, move learning forward, learn, reflect and so on in an **iterative cycle**.

...probably we could have talked together for a fortnight  
It was a useful day.

## Agenda for Action

### Emergent tasks:

The group were clear about key tasks that need immediate action, which is not to say that the rest of their deliberations should be ignored or undervalued. **Everything reflected above mattered - what is below is the most urgent:**

#### firstly:

we need an **audit of needs** - how important is creativity, ingenuity, collaborative endeavour, etc. The feeling was that these really mattered, but an audit of our **key growth sectors** (for example the creative industries) would be a powerful addition to the argument. That audit might also explore the future role of global citizens - what capabilities might **they** need?

#### secondly:

we need a **proper vision** - what do **we hope assessment will look like in 2016** - that would act as a **litmus** to guide us in today's decisions. There are clearly people doing things with ICT in learning that are horrifying and heading in a very different direction. They need to know that they are on another, rather less beguiling, route.

#### thirdly:

we need a clear set of **nations and regions** who are "**in our gang**" and helping to move this forward towards a shared vision. The UK can't and indeed **shouldn't, do this alone.**

#### fourthly:

there is substantial ICT based work to do on the **learner voice** - see above. This is a particularly urgent task. **Making people heed it** is even more urgent!

#### finally:

there is a need for some **properly brave large scale action research**. We are so confident that what we currently have is a **very long way from personalised assessment**, and we know we need personalised assessment, so where is the gamble in trying radical alternatives, under proper ethical and other controls?

**The biggest risk is in doing nothing**, or at any rate in not being brave enough in what we do try....