

Personalisation and professional learning

Frank Coffield, Professor of Education at the University of London's Institute of Education, gives his view on the challenges facing learning providers

VIEWPOINT

Students coming into colleges are presenting more complex and varied needs than ever before. What works is paying detailed attention to them as individuals and to their needs. When their problems are seen as individual and different types of help are brought to bear, students see themselves as worthy of respect, offer it to their tutors, and successes become possible. But tutors need to be able to recognise and respond appropriately to students' needs. They have to know exactly how they need to help and when they need to refer students to other experts.

Developing such professional skills involves building a model of change and learning. The model of change might be as simple as trying out other people's ideas, evaluating their impact and building the results into the next round of trying things out. It's also crucial that the development of professional skills doesn't happen in isolation. It needs to be given status, resources, support and

time, so that teachers can discuss teaching and learning, form common strategies and explore similarities and differences across departments.

Several strands of research evidence illuminate the process of developing professional skills. If tutors and organisations can recognise key ingredients of the process and the stages of development, they can increasingly take charge of their own learning. Research showing strategies that enhance student learning is useful too. There is good evidence, for example, about assessment *for* learning rather than assessment *of* learning and the quality and nature of feedback that makes a difference. There's also good evidence about what we shouldn't be doing.

Having a model of change involves us all in questioning evidence about learning. *Inside Evidence* puts research into practitioners' hands regularly, is quick to read and is a valuable resource. It makes it easy to follow up good ideas and know where to get help.

What does personalised learning mean for quality improvement in practice?

Research reviewed in this issue

- p2** How we can help learners to take responsibility for their own learning
- p3** The importance of providing feedback to learners that helps them see how they can improve
- p4** Surveys of ICT use show ways technology can help to transfer responsibility for learning to the student

WHAT'S THE EVIDENCE?

All the research we feature on these pages is carefully appraised using a specially designed instrument. This helps us to ensure that the findings are trustworthy, relevant, useable and transferable across different contexts. You will find details of the evidence sources on each page. We also include links to related resources which you may find helpful. Let us know if you'd like more information about the appraisal process by emailing us at inside.evidence@qia.gsi.gov.uk

HOW MIGHT WE HELP STUDENTS TO LEARN FOR THEMSELVES?

PERSONALISED LEARNING – HOW DOES ENGAGING WITH EVIDENCE HELP?

- *Learning to learn cannot be left to students themselves but needs to be actively taught so that the students can learn the process and see its benefits*
- *Students in self-regulated learning environments are more motivated to learn, report more enjoyment of the material and are more actively involved in their learning than those who study in more restrictive environments*

Personalising learning involves teaching in ways that stimulate students to organise their own learning and take responsibility for extending their own knowledge and skills. Among the skills that students are expected to learn are strategies for 'regulating' or managing their own learning. What kinds of classroom experiences help students learn how to learn? A recent Dutch study exploring the process of teaching students to regulate their own learning within vocational education, found a number of teaching approaches offered students positive experiences for self-regulation. It also found that fostering self-regulated learning positively affected the value that students allotted to the task and their motivation for learning.

The teaching approaches of 'powerful' learning environments identified by the study involved:

- interaction between learners – cooperative learning had positive effects on self-regulation and led students to have greater confidence in their own competence, higher intrinsic motivation and an improvement in skills

- assessment – the type of evaluation used affected learning behaviour substantially. Students were more likely to use effective learning strategies when they paid more attention to improving their own performance than comparing their performance to that of others
- self-selected, problem-based activities – such tasks gave students a better sense of how to use and apply knowledge. When learning tasks were interesting, challenging and self-selected, students were more likely to use self-regulated strategies voluntarily. They were also more likely to persist and maintain their focus when work became difficult
- autonomy – the most important task for teachers in enabling students to regulate their own learning was to encourage them to make their own decisions
- a focus on learning how to learn rather than assimilating knowledge, which meant students became open to challenge and learnt from mistakes.

The study found that the form of teaching that included most of these features was 'problem-based instruction', which the researchers commented is not the most prevalent format in vocational education. In problem-based learning classrooms, students are invited to direct their own learning from a structured menu of activities that enable them to accomplish learning tasks with a high degree of autonomy. But, as the researchers pointed out, assessment has yet to reflect this focus on learning rather than knowledge.

Evidence source: Van Grinsven, L, & Tillema, H (2006) '*Learning opportunities to support student self-regulation: comparing different instructional formats*', *Educational Research* 48 (1) pp.77-91



TAKE ACTION

How can you encourage students to direct their own learning?

Could you:

- encourage them to direct their efforts towards accomplishing interesting and challenging tasks they have selected
- help them to learn from their mistakes by asking them to think about how they carried out the task and reflect on what helped them learn and achieve?

Find out more about helping students learn effectively in the Demos report, *About learning*:

www.demos.co.uk/publications/aboutlearning

HOW CAN ASSESSMENT HELP TEACHERS AND STUDENTS TO PERSONALISE LEARNING EXPERIENCES?

ASSESSMENT

A key theme within the literature is that assessment should be a learner-centred process. That it needs to be done with learners rather than to them is a central pillar of personalisation

Personalised learning involves teachers working in partnership with students to tailor the learning experience according to their needs and personal objectives. The aim is to raise the ambitions of all students to enable them to make informed, challenging and achievable choices and to understand the consequences. In so doing, teachers encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning, and support them in becoming 'expert' learners – autonomous, reflective, self-directed, goal-oriented, self-regulating, organised, resourceful, resilient and motivated.

What skills do expert learners have?

According to a recent review of the literature on personalisation carried out by the Learning and Skills Network, expert learners are:

- aware of and able to use different types of knowledge
- able to manage time and resources effectively
- aware of and able to use a range of strategies appropriate to the learning task
- able to monitor, evaluate and adapt their learning strategies as needed to enhance their learning.

How can assessment help?

Formative assessment, sometimes described as assessment for learning (AfL) motivates students to take control of their learning and enables them to gain more confidence and skills so that they become expert learners. AfL practices include:

- effective questioning that probes students' understanding
- comment-only marking that structures students' learning

- sharing criteria with students to help them understand what counts as success
- peer assessment that helps students learn how to give and take constructive criticism and advice that will help them to progress.

The experience of assessment for learning in schools has shown that this is a powerful way of improving the quality of teaching and learning for students of all ages. The reviewers argued that AfL is perhaps even more relevant and important in further education than in schools, yet the practice isn't widespread. An important first step towards AfL is to create a culture change in the classroom. A learning and staff development manager of a college commented:

"With peer assessment, for example, I worked hard to remove the climate of fear and embarrassment that is usually caused by putting your work in the public domain for others to scrutinise."

Evidence source

Sachdev, D, Perez-del-Aguila, R, Meyer, B, & Macleod, D (2007) *Personalisation Literature Review*. Learning and Skills Network.



TAKE ACTION

– Could you make more use of AfL strategies with your students (such as comment-only marking and peer assessment) to help them take control of their learning?

For examples of how schools use AfL as well as the evidence base underpinning the practices, see the GTC's Research of the Month (RoM) website:

www.gtce.org.uk/aflrom



82%

OF COLLEGES
USED A VIRTUAL
LEARNING
ENVIRONMENT IN
2006 COMPARED
WITH 59% IN 2003

62%

OF COLLEGE
STAFF WERE
COMPETENT OR
ADVANCED IN
USING ICT WITH
LEARNERS IN 2006
COMPARED WITH
42% IN 2003

HOW CAN ICT SUPPORT PERSONALISATION?

E-LEARNING

Learners and teachers alike are finding the use of e-portfolios helpful in recording progress, career development and organising their learning

Terms like 'learning platforms' and 'e-portfolios' are becoming common currency in the post-16 sector. Both support personalisation by storing data in ways that help to transfer responsibility for learning to the student. A recent survey of colleges shows that some learning platforms are beginning make a real contribution to personalising learning:

- around half of college platforms can associate individual learners with particular courses and particular preferences
- just under 20% of platforms can remember where a student has got to in a particular course.

Some colleges make use of e-portfolios for managing evidence of learning. E-portfolios are a personal online space where learners can store their work, record their achievements, link to other learners and access

personal course timetables and digital resources. In another survey, students said they saw them as "a tool to market yourself" and "an online CV that gets updated every time you do something", while their teachers viewed them as "a method of recording and reflecting on skills" and "a career development tool". There was also evidence that e-portfolios helped students to learn:

- 62% of FE/secondary students felt that e-portfolios helped them think about their own learning
- 52% felt e-portfolios helped them judge if they've improved
- 89% of teachers felt that e-portfolios helped students to be better organised.

Evidence sources

ICT and e-learning in FE survey (Becta, November 2006. Publication available from: <http://learningandskills.becta.org.uk/>)
The impact of e-portfolios on learning (Becta, June 2007. Publication available from <http://partners.becta.org.uk/>)

For examples of how some colleges use learning platforms and e-portfolios to support personalisation, see Becta's Testbed website

www.evaluation.icctestbed.org.uk/research/show



TAKE ACTION

- Could you do more to utilise systems for storing data?
- Could you encourage students to store different stages of a project and monitor their progress with it, as a way of encouraging your students to take responsibility for their own learning?

80,000

COMPUTERS
WERE PURCHASED
BY COLLEGES
IN 2006

Evidence source
ICT and E-learning
in FE survey (Becta, 2006)