Chapter 1
Personalisation through Technology-Enhanced Learning

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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing awareness that one-size-fits-all approaches to school knowledge and organisation are ill-adapted both to individuals’ needs and to the knowledge society at large. To move beyond uniform, mass provision can be described as “personalisation” of education and of public services more widely.1

This quote is the introduction to an OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) publication (OECD, 2006) that illustrates the growing importance being placed on the concept of personalised learning. This is evident in the increasing reference to this and related terms in national and international policy documents (NSF, 2008; DfES, 2006; Becta, 2008; European Commission, 2008). This chapter will consider the discourse of the concept of personalisation and how it can be supported through technology-enhanced learning. This introduction will look at the policy rhetoric and consider to what extent it is realised in practice. It will describe a range of illustrative examples of how technologies are being used to meet the personalised learning agenda.

A Starter for Ten… Definitions of Personalisation

What is personalisation? Although this seems to be a deceptively simple and common term, its usage in an educational context is complex and subtle. Dictionary definitions of the word ‘personalise’ include ‘to endow with personal or individual

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qualities of characteristics’, or ‘design or produce (something) to meet someone’s individual requirements.’ It means many different things.

Indeed the personalisation agenda (like the technology-enhanced learning agenda) raises profound questions about the nature of education. This chapter will consider the ways in which personalisation and personalised learning are referenced from three perspectives: in policy discourse, in terms of technical developments and pedagogically. It will provide a general, yet comprehensive, overview of the field; looking both at the vision and the challenges that attempting to adopt a personalised approach raise.

The increased interest in the concept of personalised learning can in part be attributed to the fact that policy makers and educationalists have come to realise that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to education is inappropriate and won’t meet either individual or societal needs. It aligns closely with related policy agendas around the development of the information society and the concept of lifelong learning and the broader agenda concerned with living and working in a complex, modern context.

Policy documents provide a useful rarefied view of how the notion of personalisation is being seen in an educational context. The policy document ‘Harnessing Technology: Transforming Learning and Children’s Services’ sets out the UK Government’s plans for using Information and Communication Technologies, and has recently been updated by Becta (Becta, 2008). The concept of personalization is a strong theme throughout the document:

Critically, learners are making use of technology to support flexible learning stimulated by their personal use of technology. [pg. 3] Used well, technology enables more effective and more personalised teaching and learning [pg. 11] Making such [digital] resources more easily accessible to both learners and practitioners will help to ensure that learners have greater choice and control over their learning programmes, where appropriate enabling learners to adapt the pace and depth of study. [pg. 26]

A key role of learning professionals is to ensure that programmes of learning are geared to the needs of individuals and provide the right level of challenge. Technology-based tools can improve assessment for learning by providing ways in which learners can demonstrate and share their achievements, as well as providing information on progress. Combined with tailored content and resources, there are greater opportunities for a more differentiated learning experience where learners’ needs are better understood and met. [pg.26] … an understanding of how the use of technology supports more personalised approaches to learning. [pg. 30]

And the learner entitlement framework includes the following statement:

*Personalised learning which reflects learners’ interests, preferred approaches, abilities and choices, and tailored access to materials and content.* [pg. 33]

Similarly an EU document on Framework Seven technology-enhanced learning activities has numerous references to personalisation. Accommodate personalisation to respond to specific learning needs and contexts (mass-individualisation) pg 3 [The project 80days] will integrate models of adaptive personalised learning and adaptive interactive storytelling in gaming environments. Pg 6 [The project Grapple] aims at delivering a technology-enhanced learning environment for life-long learning, able to automatically adapt to personal preferences, prior knowledge, skills and competences, learning goals and the personal or social context in which the learning takes place. Pg 7

And finally one of the core research questions cited in the National Science Foundation (NSF) report on ‘cyberlearning’ is;
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