Chapter 7
Personalised eLearning in Further Education

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ABSTRACT

Electronic media can contribute to personalisation of learning both in formal and informal contexts. Efforts are made both at individual and organisational levels in Further Education to harness new technologies to enhance personal learning experiences. Personalised eLearning supports contents, activities and collaboration aimed at meeting the needs and wants of the learner (Hill, 2004 & 2008; Coryell & Chlup, 2007). However, some technology critics argue that there is very little research to support whether eLearning is an effective approach to minimise the exclusion of disadvantaged groups in society, e.g. learners of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) (Webb, 2006). The author contends that use of technology could act as a barrier to participation in learning. This study was conducted to assess the extent to which eLearning resources promote integrative/explorative learner-centred Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). This chapter reports on the findings of a qualitative action research project involving one-to-one interviews with learners (n=12) at the College of North East London (CONEL) on their deployment of various new technologies (virtual and personal learning environments) in ESOL studies during the academic year 2007/8. Additionally, three focus group interviews were held including six learner interviewees each (n=18). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four colleagues who actively integrated CALL into delivery of their ESOL sessions. Data was also collected from programme reviews, course evaluation reports and a research diary. The results of the study suggest that new technologies promote personalised learning when applied with careful planning even among learners who appear to be technophobic or are reluctant to use e-resources. Barriers hindering the integration of e-resources into the curriculum are discussed and possible solutions are also suggested.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter tackles two main research questions: 1) To what extent can Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) promote personalised learning among low level English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners in Further Education (FE)? 2) What factors can impact upon the use of CALL by these learners? The chapter critically scrutinises a number of new technologies applied in The College of North East London (CONEL) ESOL programmes and assesses their effectiveness in personalising learning to draw lessons for improved practice in the future. For example, out of necessity the CONEL ESOL programmes relied heavily on using the College Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Moodle. As Wilson et al (2006, p. 10) observe that the hegemony of VLE “…is being challenged, partly from within education by the desire to bridge the worlds of formal and informal learning and to realize the goals of lifelong learning, and partly from outside education by the increasingly prevalent forms of social software and the new paradigms of the web as technology platform”. The ESOL programme reported here employed non-VLE resources as well to compensate for the limitations of VLE to personalise learning.

The chapter is divided into four parts. The first part provides the background to the study and its context – FE and CONEL. This part also gives an over view of personalised learning initiatives and the use of new technologies in learning, more specifically, CALL. Part two presents the research methodology. The research findings are presented in part three, with an analysis of the types of new technologies (both hardware and software packages) applied and factors affected learners’ use of CALL. In part four the lessons learnt from the deployment of new technologies in an ESOL programme are discussed. Finally conclusions from the processes of applying new technologies to personalise learning and the action research process are drawn. Directions for future research also suggested.

BACKGROUND: WIDENING PARTICIPATION, PERSONALISED LEARNING AND USE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN FE

In an attempt to widen participation in learning, the UK Government is aiming for 100% attendance in schools, FE or training until age of 19. The UK Government defines widening participation as “helping more people from under-represented groups, particularly low socioeconomic groups, to participate successfully in higher education” (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2006a, p.5). The Government is also aiming to achieve a 50% participation rate of under-30-year-olds who will have participated in some form of higher education by 2010.

One way of promoting widening participation is to personalise learning. The UK Government has launched various consultations and policy documents focusing on individual learners or potential learners to address non-participation, underachievement and skills gap at all levels. For instance, the FE white paper, Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances (DfES, 2006a) argues that when learners participate in decisions affecting their learning experience, they are likely to participate more and play a more active role in the provider’s quality improvement process. The sector wide consultation paper, Personalising Further Education: Developing a Vision (DfES, 2006b), aimed to establish a shared vision as to what personalisation means in the FE sector and how the full benefits of personalised learning can be reaped by learners, providers, employers and the country as a whole. The document defined personalisation in an educational setting as “…working in partnership with the learner and employer – to tailor their learning experience and