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The voice that sings by itself: personalisation in education

Ruth Heilbronn,  
Institute of Education,  
University of London,  
20, Bedford Way,  
London, WC1H 0AL

Direct Line Tel: 020 7286 6794  
Mobile: 07947026980  
Email: [r.heilbronn@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:r.heilbronn@ioe.ac.uk)

To: [pesgbpapers@kingstonsmith.co.uk](mailto:pesgbpapers@kingstonsmith.co.uk)

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### Introduction

I am listening to Billie Holiday singing *Strange Fruit*. Technically I can sing this too, but I know I cannot sing it as she does, no matter how much I attend and imitate. I know that it is not the voice that I hear singing but the person, not *techné* but *phronesis*, allowing into Holiday's singing 'the greatest degree of flexibility, openness, and improvisation' (Dunne. p.245). Holiday sings about things that matter to her, as in this song about the lynching of black men '*in the gallant south*'. We wouldn't say about this singing 'that voice sings well', as it is clear that a voice cannot 'do well' divorced from the person who is singing. 'Doing' is a function of agency and a disembodied voice has no volition. A singer might say '*my voice is fine today*' and we might say in the third person, '*she is in good voice today*'. Both these utterances are infused with agency. To say '*the voice sings well*' is to use language fallaciously, or to engage with what I will call '*the singing voice fallacy*' (SVF). How does the SVF relate to education and particularly to the idea of '*Personalised Learning*' as promoted in official documentation in England?

### Personalised learning in the English school context

The idea of personalised learning (PL) was 'launched' in 2004 by the then DfES in a publication inviting 'A National Conversation about Personalised Learning' (DfES.2004). Currently the government 'has made £1.6 billion available for schools between 2008 and 2011 to spend on the personalisation of learning and special educational needs' (DCSF 2009). There is a dedicated website to disseminate publications and professional development materials, particularly *Personalised Learning, A Practical Guide*, launched in October 2008 'to support schools in implementing personalised learning and help prioritise their spending' (DCSF 2009). The PL 'vision' entails:

'Taking a highly structured and responsive approach to each child's and young person's learning, in order that all are able to progress, achieve and participate. It means strengthening the link between learning and teaching by engaging pupils – and their parents – as partners in learning. *Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review*'. (DCSF 2009)

A beneficial or at the least a benign definition of PL is promoted. Does this benign interpretation stand up to scrutiny? The website defines 'the

pedagogy of personalised learning 'within the context of the attainment of national educational targets:

'The pedagogy of personalisation is distinguished by the way it expects all children and young people to reach or exceed national expectations, to fulfill their early promise and develop latent potential' (DCSF 2009).

PL is presented as an application of the 'Assessment for Learning' (AfL) principles of formative assessment. There are three main tenets: students should be given a clear understanding of what they are trying to achieve (learn, or understand); specific and precise feedback on their work that provides them with knowledge about their achievement, against the previously defined norms, and advice about what they can specifically do to make personal progress (Bloom et al. 1971, DES 1988, Black and Wiliam 1998; Pollard and 2004). Formative assessment therefore implies a 'personalised' form of ongoing feedback to learners about their progress. Learners are put at the centre of the learning process and understanding aspects of their own learning is seen as a key to their progress for learners. To critique PL might seem to challenge the right of all learners to be able to reach their own personal 'best' and to deny the principles of 'inclusion' (DfEE & QCA 1999) and equality of opportunity. The view of PL, as about personal learning goals and related to personal progress, seems to be about entitlement and 'inclusion' and so the benign definition of PL seems secure.

This benign view of PL is widespread. For example, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) states,

'many school leaders have recognised and embraced the possibilities for values-driven innovation that the personalisation debate offers ... to enhance the educational experience of children and young people'.  
(NCSL 2006, p.4).

A further illustration is the finding that 'personalised learning' when applied to a particular programme for secondary school students 'promoted learning' by bringing about:

- school as a learning community for all those involved in the educative process;
- learner at the centre of the educative process;
- learner autonomy developed within a clear curriculum framework;
- active rather than passive learning;
- teacher as guide and facilitator;

- learners as constructors of their own knowledge.' (Rataj-Worsnop 2006, p.18).

These conclusions do not tell us anything new about a good learning environment, and do not need a specific PL concept to generate. However, they are also difficult to reject as aspirations for schools.

### **Whose formation in formative assessment?**

To criticise the idea of personal and formative feedback on the AfL principles seems churlish or misguided. Yet the questions 'formative assessment *of what and in what context?*' are pertinent. Significantly, the research report, '*Inside the Black Box*' that started off the AfL movement was a review of six hundred articles of research findings on assessment processes and practices, of which forty were selected as a strong research base about learning, to evaluate against three questions:

1. Is there evidence that improving formative assessment raises standards?
2. Is there evidence that there is 'room for improvement'?
3. Is there evidence about how to improve formative assessment? (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p.2)

'Raising standards' was therefore a stated, key element in the quest for 'good' assessment principles. Formative assessment and the personalisation of learning are situated within the standards discourse and the implementation of a various national strategies, which prescribe particular ways of teaching, and in some cases, particular content. There is little wriggle room for individual curriculum initiatives, or time to take a particular lesson on a tangential path. In the singing metaphor, the DCSF notion of PL is equivalent to the disembodied voice singing a particular conductor-chosen repertoire. What sort of personal voice does a school child have and how is the repertoire chosen? To read the personalised learning concept as supportive and helpful to individual persons is to commit the SVF since the notions of 'inclusion' and PL are constructed within a particular discourse, that of standards assessment. Schools are not at liberty to construct their own curricular and their own assessment mechanisms and an individual student's own particular achievements are situated within the auditing process of the school, in which the school's achievements are reported against specific, nationally set targets. So a school child who may want to sing a delicate melody might be required to belt out a rousing chant (or the other way round), unlike Holiday who was able to continue to sing *Strange Fruit*, at her shows, despite pressure against her.

## Experience, learning and excellence

Holiday also 'sings the blues', and through her singing conveys something of her own experience, although precisely what this experience is would not be possible for me to know. I could say that she enables me feel the blues she sings. We could describe her singing in this regard as effective and affective. The DCSF promotes the notion of students experiencing excellence in their learning, as a necessary outcome of their experience of PL. 'We want every pupil to *'experience excellence in their learning'* (DfES 2004, p.3). This is difficult to sort out, and for the purposes of this article I am concentrating on the idea of 'experiencing learning' as a goal of PL. A discussion of what it means to 'experience excellence' is also relevant and interesting as it involves judgement and values, however this discussion is beyond the scope of the argument in this paper.

What *sort* of things can be experienced'? It is clear that we experience sensations, emotions, biofeedback from our actions, and so on. It seems evident that we cannot divorce learning from affective factors, motivation, emotion and so on which would be committing the SVF. We come to any situation with our own 'take'. As Dewey has said,

experience is *of* as well as *in* nature. It is not experience which is experienced ... things interacting in certain ways *are* experience; they are what is experienced. Linked with ... the human organism they are *how* things are experienced as well. Experience thus reaches down into nature; it has depth. It stretches. That stretch constitutes inference. (Dewey, 1958, p.4)

Each individual 'contributes' to the sense which she makes of her own experience, through the interplay of her own personal affective factors, so that no two people can have the *same* experience. 'Experience' is tautologically personal. The DCSF, in drawing attention to the importance of each individual's 'experience' in the learning process is stating the obvious in some way. 'Personalised' therefore has no real purchase. All learning is personal to someone or no learning would have come about. Adjusting one's teaching as far as possible to ensure that individual pupils know what they are intended to learn, and engage individually with the learning, is not a new idea. So in an important sense 'personalised learning' is nothing new. The term 'personalised' is redundant, as it is not clear what is added to the notion of 'learning' by the idea of 'personalisation'. If I have learnt something we could say that my learning has been 'personalised' to me. If I have not managed 'to learn', there may be many factors to consider, some of which may be personal to me, some of which may not. So it seems that we are better off without the term 'personalised' in these cases.

## Personalisation of learning - what are the aims?

From the advice disseminated by the National Strategies website we learn that PL is not about *individualising* learning (DfES 2006) and is not therefore to be construed as relating to the individual pupil's learning *per se*. In fact there is a complex instrument, involving a taxonomy of targets that need to be 'personalised' for the individual pupil in the DCFS guide to the practical implementation of PL, where we may learn that:

'the key to manageability is the layering of targets in order to provide a clear route from the numerical target to the curricular target for the group or individual an individual pupil' (DCFS 2008, p.16).

The fact that PL is constructed within the standards agenda, is part of standards discourse (Fielding, 2008) and commits the SVF, leads me now to widen my perspective to see if I can salvage any useful meaning and application for the term. I am driven to this goal because of the stated PL 'vision', which is taken from the discourse of rights and entitlement. I shall focus now on the notion of 'learning' and the fact that teaching activities which take place in schools are planned within a particular curriculum, and curricular are necessarily constructed on particular aims, even when these are not explicitly stated. In a culture where the aim of education is to pass on a tradition, so that learners may hear about, remember and recount important aspects of that culture, rote learning, chanting and reciting, might be appropriate teaching activities. A transmission mode is appropriate to achieve the aims of such an education process. Whereas a different mode is required in a different culture where an aim of education is the development of a critical faculty. 'Learning' functions as a different signifier in the two traditions and needs to be defined in relation to the aims underlying the broader context. In a class of 50 where the aim is to transmit a particular text to the learners, any learner that remembers and can recite the text has succeeded in learning it. The text does not need to be directed at her personally, but can be sent forth into a large gathering. On the second context of aims, teaching needs to be planned, so that individual pupils do have a chance to personally engage with the lesson. For example in a humanities or English class where the aim is to get all the pupils to think about the reasons for immigration, and to engage critically with various texts taken from newspaper articles and readers' letters, some pupils may already be able to think critically in this context, others may need a prompt, such as some well directed questioning, the chance to exchange views and have these views put under pressure. They may need the opportunity to develop their arguments. Better still in relation to the aim, and arguably more 'personalised' would be to ask pupils to state views, or bring in articles they have found, or interview people in their

circle of family and friends. These are standard techniques for lesson planning on the aim stated. Despite these teaching activities however, some pupils may end the lesson no wiser. The large literature on 'wisdom' gives me a clue here to my pursuit of clarity about PL and the depth and breadth of thinking that the subject invites.

It is evident that the underlying aims of any educational endeavour determine what is learnt and this in turn is usually a function of a particular curriculum design. Learners are situated in the context of a curriculum which has underlying aims. Where a curriculum is standards led, the notion of PL helps to hide the ambiguity around the notion of learning and progressing. It smudges the distinction between learning for human related progress, (the singer) with the concept of learning for target-related progress (the voice). This fuzzy smudging can create tension and conflict for teachers and pupils alike, as they may not understand that the stated aim of PL often conflicts with the freedom to act 'with pedagogical thoughtfulness' (Van Manen 1991). To pick up the notion of '*experiencing excellence in learning*', for example, in a Year 9 English lesson constructed to enable the pupils to 'write *better*', there may be conflicting aims. A pupil might scribble stories in an exercise book at home. She would like her English teacher to help her to write *better*. She wants to be helped to understand what makes a *good* story, and expresses a good story as 'one that grabs people, to which they respond'.

The English teacher may have other aims. The reply, if such a dialogue took place might be,

'I'm sorry – today we are studying Kipling to see how he uses punctuation, because next week you will have a test on it and I want you to get *better* marks than last time. I want you to do *better* than before'.

The fuzzy understanding of the term PL as both individualised, differentiated teaching and as raiser of standards matters to the pupil and to the teacher. There is a common source of conflict for many teachers who are told to be both attentive to all pupils' individual needs and also a '*delivery technician*' of various curriculum strategies, within the culture of target setting and league tables. In this context 'personalised learning' itself becomes a target. It may be the case that at times, with some pupils and students no conflict arises. The pupils can learn in their own individual way, in a way which fits within the high stakes assessment regime within which the school fits. But often pupils cannot, so they too are caught in this tension. When this conflict is not properly understood the reasons why these pupils are not managing to 'reach their standards and targets' are often cited as the contingencies of lack of time and resources, but lack of resources is not a sufficient condition for a failure to achieve, as there the fact of a fundamental clash between the audit culture and the idea of

each individual pupil learning in her own personalised way, with her own individual need for time to absorb new material and to experience the learning, and this puts teachers in an impossible situation.

Significantly in shifting from '*personal*' to '*personalised*' the balance of control shifts from the individual pupil who experiences something personal to herself, to a pupil who experiences something personalised by someone else for a particular reason, on a particular aim.

## **Conclusion**

Conflicting aims appear in current policy and practice in education. On the one hand, the National Curriculum aims, and the statement of values (DfEE and QCA 1999) expresses the view that education is valuable in itself, to promote the well-being and flourishing of the individual. On the other hand, the plethora of policies and strategies which relate to the development of skills, is indicative of schooling designed to prepare citizens, or consumers for employment in a globalised economy. But, having transferable skills and being adept at learning new skills does not necessarily lead to employment. If a person is disappointed in employment, or lack of it, she will need inner resources to remain optimistic and happy, so the need to develop flexible work skills cannot replace the aims of education to enable pupils to lead a good life. The debate around the notion of PL is important as it relates to how we conceive the aims of education, and the kinds of activities that enhance human flourishing.

'Personalised learning' has itself become a target to be achieved by schools, and has a function in an audit culture. It does not carry the meaning of ipsative progress and is a compromised concept, born from the singing voice fallacy. Personalised learning as conceived in current policy is a tool in the standards assessment regime in which the individual student is situated. We do not need the concept of PL if 'the repertoire' is chosen wisely and the aims on which the curriculum is developed are not merely instrumental but related more broadly to human flourishing.

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