PERSONALISED LEARNING
ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION
SUMMARY REPORT 2011

Personalised
Learning
The educational challenge of our time

INTRODUCTION

On 3 November 2011, the Crowther Centre for Learning and Innovation and the Victorian Council of School Organisations (VICCSO) co-hosted a roundtable discussion involving twenty-five participants and a wide range of stakeholders to explore personalised learning.

This report summarises the key issues in the discussion and outlines several recommendations and practical actions.

The issues canvassed in this report do not, of course, necessarily denote consensus between all who participated. There was a tremendous plurality of views about specifics, but many would agree that personalised learning offers much promise and possibility, and that a movement for personalisation may be critical in improving learning outcomes and reducing achievement gaps.

The roundtable attendees included Nicholas Abbey, Andrew Baylis, Phil Brown, Andree Butler, Lea Campbell, Dawn Colcott, John Graham, Henry Grossek, Andrew Horgan, David Howes, Russell Ives, Gabrielle Leigh, David Loader, Danielle Lord, Duncan McGauchie (Advisor to the Minister for Education, Hon. Martin Dixon MP), Jo McLeay, Sandra Mahar, Jan Mills, Annette Rome, Assistant Commissioner Kevin Scott, Matt Sheehan, Dale Sheppard, Michael Victory, Kate Walsh, and Warrick Wynne.

Apologies were received from Richard Bolt, Ian Burrage, Professor Brian Caldwell, Ross Dean, Christine Delamore, Dina Guest, Wendy Graham, Hon. Peter Hall MP, Peter Hendrickson, David Kennedy, Hon. Nicholas Kotsiras MP, Mark Kosach, Tony Kruger, Gail McHardy, Denis Moriarty, Justin Mullaly, Ty Newton, Keith Rhodes, Stefan Romaniw, Frank Sal, Vincent Sicari, Glenda Strong, Chris Wardlaw, and David Warner.

That a preliminary discussion attracted such a diverse range of people augurs well for the future of education, especially given that the visionary leadership and practical initiatives necessary for personalisation will be grounded in creating new and unprecedented collaborations.

SUMMARY OF
POSSIBLE ACTIONS

Given the high level of interest in the roundtable discussion, there is a strong commitment among many stakeholders to a personalised learning project being developed.

Based on the many discussions before, during and following the roundtable, six possible project actions include:

1. **Defining 'personalised learning'.** Around the table, there were many views about the concept. There was a strong desire to establish a core, minimalist definition upon which other work and discussions could be based.

2. **Building the partnership.** Developing a network team and a shared plan to promote a broad, multi-stakeholder, cross-sectoral, partnership approach to personalised learning.

3. **Sharing best practices.** Identifying, documenting and showcasing best practices, including through action projects in various organisations supported by the 'network', and encouraging dissemination of the lessons, benefits and challenges and investigating the staff training needs and technological infrastructure required for proper implementation.

4. **Research and development.** Developing practical steps toward a shared understanding, vision, model and taxonomy of personalised learning, including:
   a) Collecting and summarising current academic research in this field.

   b) Supporting further research into implementation, pedagogy and tools.

5. **Supporting a community dialogue.** Creating an online forum for the sharing of ideas and information, and engaging school principals, teachers, parents, students and others in conversations about the 'what', 'why' and 'how' of personalisation.

6. **Securing resources and support.** Meeting with key stakeholders in the public, community and business sectors, seeking their participation, resources and support.

Obviously very ambitious in scope, a first step would be to convert these possible actions into manageable 'bite-size' pieces by developing a plan for what is do-able and achievable in 2012.

SIX KEY THEMES

The themes are outlined as follows:

1. Understanding personalised learning.
2. Models and good practices.
3. Teachers, time and technology.
4. Educational equity and inclusion.
5. Leadership and governance.
6. Where to from here?

1. Understanding personalised learning

What remains of the factory system of mass schooling - historically an efficient way of delivering consistent, uniform instruction to large numbers of students - can no longer meet the educational challenges which cultural and social diversity presents in schools. Among the other points made:

- The idea of personalisation is not new – teachers have long developed personalised learning – but the opportunities to advance it are. These include technologies to bring personalised learning to scale. As a participant put it:

"We are experiencing a revolution in teaching and learning. Maybe, this is the first time in history when we actually have the technological tools to take the revolution forward"

- Personalisation is about embracing the learning and development of the 'whole student', and has the potential to help further break down old distinctions and structural divisions between academic and applied learning and classroom and community-based learning.

- The learning journey is not a narrowly defined, institutionally prescribed 'pathway', thus supporting the learner's right to all-round personal development and including the extent to which students' personal everyday experiences, ideas and insights and formal school instruction are combined to engender deeper student learning.

- Personalised learning is still in an "early developmental phase", and needs to be clearly distinguished from other terms in education. As a participant posed the question:

"What is the difference between pedagogy for personalised learning and current good teaching practices?"

- Some participants suggested that personalised learning and effective teaching overlap but are not the same. Differences include shifts in curriculum, pathways, and assessment together with the greater dependency on students' biography as a key variable in teaching.

- Personalising learning is not teacher-centric; it means aligning knowledge and skills so that the efforts of teachers, parents, students and others converge for each learner, thus redefining the roles of the school, teacher, student, and parents/family in education.

- Personalisation provides a broad framework (as distinct from a narrow focus such as the educational practices that can emerge around standardised testing), thus supporting balance, breadth and depth in students' educational experience and development.

- There is a need for a taxonomy to divide personalised learning into the specific elements that distinguish it from 'non-personalised' teaching and learning practices.

2. Models and good practices

The discussion revealed the challenge of linking up policies, teachers' good practices, curricula, data, assessment tools, system supports, and technologies that are needed to develop an effective personalised learning model. Among the points that were made:

- Traditional educational reforms can tweak rather than redesign education to meet the diversity of students' backgrounds, needs, preferences, goals and interests.

- Personalisation is an alternative to overly standardised, one-size-fits-all models, but yet to be developed is a model of personalised learning. There was interest in advancing this.

- A participant discussed how in her school students negotiated with teachers their learning and other personal goals. Given that "as educators we obviously need to redefine how we teach and learn", at this school professional development was critical. This model integrated teacher coaching, the lead role of an ICT teacher and an extension program.
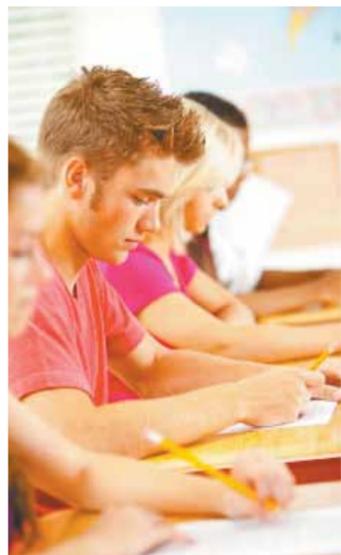
- In another school, personalistion "meant major challenges including some workforce remodeling". It required a much higher level of collaboration and a strategic approach to this educational transition, "which was exciting but also very challenging".

- Understanding how students can be powerful agents of personalisation was noted as a key issue.

- Student voice is of pivotal importance, although care has to be taken with not presuming that students know what they need to know and learn. It has to be shown that personalised learning has rigour and robustness so as to be viable.

- Languages education may emerge as a key area for demonstrating the efficacy of personalised learning. Mentioned in this regard was the work of:

  › the Ministerial Advisory Council for a Multicultural and Multilingual Victoria.

  › Professor Yong Zhao who links effective languages learning and personalisation.

- Personalisation dovetails with P-12 schooling, which takes shape when primary and secondary school teachers complement each other by developing a unified P-12 approach to pedagogy and curricula. Phil Brown (CEO of the Country

Education Project) emphasised how personalisation and the P-12 learning continuum co-develop.

- The challenge of how to measure progress with personalisation, including developing tools and meaningful data to better understand each student's learning, development and achievement as a whole person (and not only literacy and numeracy performance).

- Assessment and statistical modeling will be key issues in any development of programs that aim to set expectations and determine progress.

3. Teachers, time and technology

Personalisation involves developments in teaching, brings to the fore the question of time, and depends on the leveraging of new and emerging technologies. Among the points made:

- How does the teacher's role change in a personalised learning model? Some felt that it is likely to transform the work of teachers which obviously raises the question as to what teachers need by way of professional development and peer support for personalisation.

- In relation to teachers' own personalised learning, there was strong support for work within teacher training and professional development programs.

- The demands on teachers' time of personalisation. Resources such as the Ultranet may assist with personalised learning in a time-efficient way via easy access to data and curriculum and content resources.

- Personalisation can develop without technology but to become mainstream requires the extensive use of new and emerging technologies (data systems, digital content, online and blended learning, online learning plans, Web 2.0 resources, etc.) so as to:

  › better track the learning needs, preferences, interests, goals and progress of all students.

  › provide a means to access all kinds of learning content, resources and learning opportunities needed to meet the needs of a student as a whole person.

- The use of technology provides opportunities for teachers and students to work across multiple sites of learning and manage personalised learning plans and portfolios.

- Technology on its own does not necessarily improve outcomes or enhance the potential of personalised learning. Other factors are just as important including class sizes, time with teachers and intervention strategies such as reading recovery programs.

4. Educational equity and inclusion

It was noted that educational equity and inclusion may be best progressed via a mix of the requisite resources and the increasing personalisation of each student's learning pathway together with the development of a pedagogy for personalisation. Among the points made:

- How do we reconcile equity and personalised learning? One response was that personalisation may redefine what is meant by equity and how best to achieve it, and could result in a fairer, more efficient and creative use of available resources.

- There is perhaps no more important equity issue than to further reshape schooling around all learners' needs, aspirations, talents, interests and right to all-round development.

- Given that a diverse student mix requires greater personalisation of learning, educational equity is about the use of resources for the personalisation of students' learning.

- Equity goes beyond the classroom to educate the 'whole student', which brings to the fore the quality of the learning relationships and partnerships between teachers, students, families, mentors, and members of the wider community.

- Some individuals need more support than others, but the current system does not cater adequately for all of
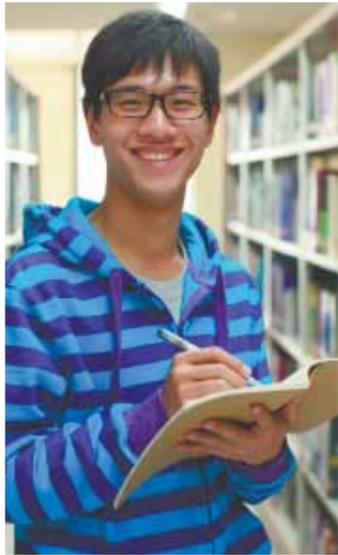
the needs of students as individuals and constrains personalisation.

- There is the key issue of equitable access to technology that supports personalised learning.

5. Leadership and governance

With bold leadership and good governance, the prospects for mainstreaming personalised learning are enhanced. Indeed, the realisation of personalisation may depend to a large degree on effective and tenacious leadership within and across schools. Among the points made:

- Leadership for personalisation is grounded in relationship-building and developing a shared vision and values within school communities, and personalisation "can open new pathways of communication across all stakeholders at the local school level".

- Given that, as a participant put it, "the boundaries between school and the outside world are increasingly blurred and personalisation is not simply about the school domain", leadership will become more dispersed, and the question of how best to develop widely shared goals among teachers, students, families and others will come to the fore.

- Personalisation enhances the leadership role of principals and compels us to rethink what it means to be a 'leader' in schooling and what it means to build 'leadership'.

- Leadership will need to come not only from within formal structures of schools but also from students and their families, many kinds of practitioners and community stakeholders.

- School councils and boards can spread responsibility for personalisation throughout the whole school community. Key initiatives may include developing shared school-family-community goals and a learning compact that defines the shared goals and contributions to personalised learning of the school, students, parents and community groups.

- The challenge of building leadership of personalised learning networks within and across the government, Catholic and independent sectors and across geographical boundaries.

6. Where to from here?

There was strong support for researching models and good practices for personalisation and sharing what works. The possible actions necessary to advance the further development of personalisation are detailed at the beginning of this report. In summary, these are:

1. Defining 'personalised learning'
2. Building the partnership
3. Sharing best practices
4. Research and development
5. Supporting a community dialogue
6. Securing resources and support

Conclusion

Whether or not personalisation will serve to 'revolutionise' education and schooling is uncertain. However, there is some indication that personalisation is entering a new phase, marked by the emergence of new technologies with the potential to help mainstream personalisation. And by promoting the ideas shared at the roundtable, we can move the discussion forward, and by way of a new network we can collaboratively develop and support some practical next steps.

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