Opportunities for personalised learning: enabling or overwhelming?

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the development of a personalised learning approach within a professional distance learning course. The issues arising are of relevance to academics engaged in course development, with an emphasis on fostering independent learning. The course focuses on enabling student teachers to develop their generic skills, attributes and knowledge through reflective practice. The current course differs from the previous model through its emphasis on a question-led approach in which students are encouraged to identify and respond to their own learning needs in independent ways. Student evaluations and contributions at the course mid-point suggest that, while most are engaged with the notion of being an independent learner, some students are challenged by this expectation. This in turn raises questions about the concept of personalised learning.

Introduction

This paper evaluates the development and impact of a personalised learning approach, with an emphasis on fostering independent learning within a professional distance learning course. The distance learning course, designed to enable independent learning, is evaluated with reference to, learner autonomy (Boud, 1988), learner dependency (Light and Cox, 2001); superficial learning (Entwistle, 1996) and learner preferences (Sadler-Smith and Smith, 2004). Analysis of the revised course design indicates a focus on necessitating independent learning without sufficient consideration of how to provide for the diversity of learners' needs.

Context for change

This paper explores the effectiveness of changes in the design and delivery of the education studies course within a flexible modular (FM) distance learning Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) for student teachers. Education studies develops students' awareness of different pedagogies and methodologies. This paper focuses on changes from a prior model to the current model and anticipates potential further changes.

The education studies course is delivered through a blended approach that includes face-to-face sessions and learning through online discussion boards and resources. The changes that were made within the education studies component have also influenced the revision and development of the whole FM programme, with a focus on supporting independent learning. The new education studies course was developed in response to the Professional Standards for Teachers (Training and Development Agency – TDA, 2007) and in response to ongoing curricular review led by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority – QCA (2008).

Review of literature

Boud (1988:17), taking the broadest view, argues that autonomy is:

> ...an integral part of learning of any kind. No learner can be effective in more than a very limited area if he or she cannot make decisions for themselves about what they should be learning and how they should be learning it: teachers cannot …guide every aspect of the process of learning.

This might seem to anticipate more recent calls for personalised learning, for example, Minister of State Miliband's observation (2003) cited in Johnson (2004:2) that:

>...*effective teaching depends on knowing the needs, strengths and weaknesses of individual pupils...*

and that:

>...*student performance also depends on independent learning.*

However, in spite of the often synonymous use of independence and autonomy (Boud, 1988:21), there are clearly differences between Miliband's vision of independence, implying teachers' knowledge of individual pupils' needs, and Boud's (1988:18) notion of autonomy in which individuals develop:

>...*the ability to make their own decisions about what they think and do.*

Nevertheless, limits to what is to be learnt and what is worth learning remain: the content of the course in question is informed by the Training and Development Agency (TDA), Department for Children, Schools and Families and QCA standards and expectations, so:

>...*questions about who has authority to define what is to be learned...*

although characteristic of autonomous situations (Wilcox, 1996:173), are considerably constrained in this context.

Learners' 'broadening responsibility … for their own learning' (Light and Cox, 2001:84) becomes essential when the course in question is one designed for FM distance learners. As Sadler-Smith and Smith (2004:398) argue:

>*Flexible learning requires learners to exhibit a degree of autonomy and self-direction in order to engage effectively.*

However, this flexibility involves the removal of structures, such as regular face-to-face input that learners may be familiar with or rely upon. Light and Cox (2001:141) note that such 'open-endedness can be threatening'. They argue that while learners may initially require:

>...*more support …it is important not to set up patterns and expectations that mean that students remain in a state of dependency.*

>(Light and Cox, 2001:141)

A flexible model involving independent engagement is, arguably, one that best addresses the learners' 'intrinsic' interests and facilitates development of learners' aptitudes to integrate new understanding with existing experience: in short, that lends itself to a 'deep approach' to learning (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999:3). However, learners exhibiting autonomy may not necessarily be developing deep learning. Entwistle (1996:109–110) suggests that materials:

>...*designed to encourage deep approaches … can equally make surface approaches much easier for students. Independent study can foster critical analysis or protect students from the need to demonstrate it.*

Arguably, FM distance learners have a greater need to manage time and effort strategically, particularly if their choice to embark on such a route is driven by competing responsibilities. Perhaps the freedom granted by flexible materials allows these 'strategic' students (Entwistle, 1996:101), or their peers for whom expectations of autonomy may cause anxiety (Moon, 2004:59), to resort to a surface approach to study.

This is further complicated by learners' preferences and perceptions of their own levels of dependence or autonomy. While recognising that autonomy and 'effective engagement' go hand-in-hand, Sadler-Smith and Smith (2004:403) argue that course designers who ignore learner preferences may find that some students develop:

>...*sub-optimal levels of motivation, engagement …and …learning performance.*

To illustrate this, Sadler-Smith and Smith cite the example of vocational education and training learners in Australia whose preference for visual and dependent modes of learning conflicted with the verbal/independent approaches demanded by the 'resource-based flexible delivery' course design (2004:403).

These three overlapping elements – expectations of autonomy, deep and surface approaches to learning, and learning preferences – present the FM distance learning course developer with a range of dilemmas. Sadler-Smith and Smith conclude that, in order to address these apparent contradictions of course requirement (autonomy) and student (differences in styles and preferences, including dependence), 'learning to learn' input is key, as well as a need to provide training for trainers to support this (2004:408). However, if autonomy and deep learning are valid outcomes, perhaps we need to provide learners with opportunities to articulate their own interpretations of 'learning' and to express what their own perceptions of their needs are. As Prosser and Trigwell (1999) argue:

...university teachers …need to be continually aware that each student …will perceive his or her situation differently. It is not sufficient to develop a context which affords a deep approach to study. University teachers need also to determine how their students are perceiving their situation within that context.

(Prosser and Trigwell, 1999:82)

Changes

This notion of personalisation, of autonomy and independent learning formed a backdrop to the changes the FM course developers effected on the education studies programme. Changes were also informed by the QCA's 'Big Picture' (2008) which provides a more holistic notion of the curriculum that focuses on attitudes, knowledge and understanding, and skills. These foci resonate with the revised professional standards (TDA, 2007) that students need to demonstrate; see Figure 1.

Figure 1

A selection of professional standards for student teachers Training and Development Agency, (2007) Professional Standards for Teachers		
Professional attributes	**Professional knowledge and understanding**	**Professional skills**
Q7-9 • Reflective • Take responsibility • Creative and critical approach towards innovation • Adapt practice • Open to coaching and mentoring	**Q10-21** • Have • Know • Understand • Be aware of	**Q22-33** • Plan • Design • Teach • Use • Build • Adapt • Assess • Establish • Evaluate

Course developers were aware that professional attributes, such as:

- reflectiveness
- taking responsibility
- adopting creative and critical approaches
- being open to coaching and mentoring

while underpinning what it is to be a professional (TDA, 2007:8), are specified in only three of the 33 newly revised professional standards:

- reflect on and improve their practice, and take responsibility for identifying and meeting their developing professional needs; identify priorities for their early professional development in the context of induction
- have a creative and constructively critical approach towards innovation, being prepared to adapt their practice where benefits and improvements are identified
- act upon advice and feedback and be open to coaching and mentoring.

Education studies, with its generic applicability to meta-learning, seemed to lend itself to addressing these key areas; see Figure 2 - page 46.

Figure 2

Changes to Education Studies Course	Intended Impact on learning	Links with Professional Attributes TDA (2007 p.8)
Expectations of preparedness for face-to-face sessions	Deeper critical engagement with issues	**Q7a, Q7b, Q8 & Q9**
Opportunities within sessions to develop attributes eg such as criticality, alongside skills and knowledge	Clarify understanding of concepts; transfer learning – eg understanding of their development as a reflective practitioner, to practice and PGCE assessment	
Opportunities to extend critical engagement beyond the sessions through tutor-facilitated discussion board forums	Socially construct and deconstruct understanding through peer and tutor dialogue	
Remove online summary assessment	Deeper critical engagement with learning	
Provide online units based on an open-ended questioning model	Construct learning autonomously; personalised engagement	
Make explicit links between session content and school placement experience	Reflectivity; socially construct links between different situated learning environments	
Develop new PGCE assessment	Opportunity to apply situated learning; demonstrate criticality and transfer synthesised understanding to subsequent placements	

A new course framework was devised which emphasised an expectation that students would arrive at sessions already familiar with key materials; see Figure 3.

Figure 3

Preparation for session QTS assessment	Session heading	Content	Themes	After the session	S07.4 (1) A	S07.4 (2) A	S07.4 L	QTS standards
Study online unit 4.4 Assessment & Planning	2. Assessment for Learning Lesson Planning	• Assessment • Lesson Planning • Differentiation: Grouping	Reflective practice Inclusion (ECM— Enjoy & achieve)	Access and contribute to PAT group's forum on Assessment for Learning Reflective Journal	Monday 17/09/07 2-4pm	Monday 24/09/07 2-4pm	Monday 17/09/07 2-4pm	**Q1** **Q2** **Q7-10** **Q12** **Q18-20** **Q32**

Students are directed to online units for self-study. These units are based around open-ended questions that link to resources; see Figure 4, such as case studies, readings and government guidance; the units pose questions designed to contribute to students' pedagogical knowledge and skills base.

Figure 4

Unit 4.4 – Planning and assessment cycle
Table of contents
1 QTS standards 2 How does the planning and assessment cycle work? 3 How do I evaluate my lessons? 4 How can I ensure my planning and assessment are effective? 5 How can I keep records of what children can do? What should be reported? 6 References and further readings 7 Related units

The notion behind this was that, by engaging in such preparatory work, students would approach sessions from informed positions, enabling them to fully participate, focus on critical thinking, and demonstrate reflectiveness, rather than perceive the purpose of the face-to-face session as transmissive.

Beyond the face-to-face session, further opportunities are provided to continue the engagement with reflectiveness and critical thinking. The online assessment activities that had been central to the previous model were removed, as on reflection these only necessitated superficial engagement. Open-ended questions on discussion boards were designed to facilitate a social constructivist approach to learning. Tutors moderated these discussions through:

> ...*modelling ways of exploring and developing arguments.*

(Salmon, 2002:32)

The new model mirrors Moon's notion of how a learner can move from an egocentric, descriptive perception of reflective practice to a greater awareness of how being a member of a learning community can support deeper engagement with reflectivity and synthesis (Moon, 2004:41).

In response to students' concerns that links between face-to-face sessions and school practice were not sufficiently transparent, the placement handbooks (see Figure 5) now provide a series of tutorial questions, more explicitly contextualising issues raised through session content and school practice.

Figure 5

Questions for weekly tutorials with AT	Professional knowledge and understanding	Professional standards for QTS
2 How are you demonstrating inclusive practice through your classroom and school practice?	**BB> New education studies 2007 online units** National policies and strategies for schools 2.1 Inclusion 3.2 Inclusive practice 4.3 Differentiation 4.5 **PGCE assignment PFM 301 (if applicable)**	**Q1-Q2** **Q7-9** **Q18-21** **Q22** **Q25c and d** **Q26-28** **Q29** **Q30-31**
3 How have your assessments of children's learning and your lesson evaluations affected your planning and teaching? Pay particular attention to your involvement with Foundation subjects	**BB> New education studies 2007 online units** Reflective practice 4.2 Assessment & planning 4.4 Relevant core subjects **BB> Reflective practitioner online module**	**Q7-9** **Q11-15** **Q22-24** **Q26-Q29**

These questions model starting points for discussion between the school-based mentors (Associate Tutor or AT) and the student. Students are also directed back to specific online units in order to prepare for such discussions. Mentor support in school can provide the optimum in personalised support, however it might be argued that the emphasis on modelling good practice may restrict a more flexible response to the students' needs. Course developers see the potential of the tutorial questions as providing opportunities for mentors and students to engage in reflective pedagogical dialogue.

The PGCE assessment for the education studies course was revised to reflect course developers' intended focus on independent learning. A fictional case study, comprising a student teacher's lesson plan, the student teacher's evaluation of the resulting lesson, and a mentor's evaluation of the same lesson, was developed. Engagement with this case study provides a focus for face-to-face sessions and online discussion. The PGCE assessment requires students to critically evaluate their own inclusive classroom practice with reference to the case study and their wider reading. This revision was in response to reflection on the previous assessment model that limited collaborative engagement to peer review, which was at times uninformed. Mid-point in the revised course, students are introduced to the case study in a face-to-face session, and subsequently have to demonstrate their critical evaluative skills, both through independent postings and reflections on peer postings, in the knowledge that these contributions will contribute to their PGCE assessment.

Generic feedback from the tutors on the online discussions provides students with an opportunity to reflect, individually and collectively, on their thinking and understanding of criticality. Students then explore a specific aspect of inclusive practice based on their own placement experience, comparing and contrasting this with practice identified and discussed in the case study.

Analysis and implications
This review of the revised education studies course reveals the course developers' expectation that independent approaches to learning would ensue from engagement with a course that necessitated such an approach. However, as noted by Light and Cox (2001), some of the FM distance learners found this expectation 'threatening' (2001:141) and further reflection on previous years' student evaluations indicated that some felt it would be:

> *...useful to be told things from the lecturer rather than being left to group discussions. Lectures are useful.*

It could be argued that, while the previous education studies course invited dependency, the importance of uncovering the causes of dependency was not sufficiently explored, partly due to the need for expediency – that is, course delivery deadlines – but also because of a focus on high and not sufficiently differentiated expectations. The course developers relied on their own understanding of independent learning and anticipated what they interpreted as the causes of learner dependency, rather than engaging with learners' preferences and perceptions of themselves as dependent/autonomous learners, a key factor identified by Sadler-Smith and Smith (2004:403).

Both Boud (1988:17) and Light and Cox (2001:141) are unequivocal in their critique of traditional transmission models of teaching and learning. However, as suggested by this paper, expectations of independence should not be confused with providing appropriate scaffolding. Mid-course evaluations, while mainly positive, included comments that indicated a sense of being overwhelmed and of seeking more direction from the tutors:

> *...need more guidance …apart from session materials what other work should we be doing? …provides limited guidance, don't know where to start, what to prioritise.*

There was a preference for what was perceived as more assessment-led approaches:

> *...prefer more direction on where to start, like other subjects with unit assessment deadlines.*

In comparison with other modules on the FM PGCE programme, the education studies course has less assessment, although it is still assessment-driven both in terms of preparing the students to meet the statutory Professional Standards (TDA, 2007) and to pass the PGCE assessment. However, some of the students' perceptions of course assessment are clearly influenced by the nature of comparable modules that include assessments at fixed points. The PGCE assessment for the revised education studies course was redesigned, in line with the focus on personalised learning, allowing students to select examples from their postings on the discussion board that illustrate their engagement with critical evaluation. Nevertheless, this well-intended approach may only offer the more confident and independent learners the opportunity to select effectively

from their postings; other students may feel threatened by the responsibility to identify examples of their critical engagement, a concept they may not fully understand. The students' preferences for external deadlines and more structured learning resonate with findings from the current review of primary education:

The current emphasis on testing, and the large amount of work activities which need to be to completed, result in pupils seeing the value of trusting teachers to decide what has to be learned, thus moving away from pupils being independent learners.

(Robinson and Fielding, 2008:21)

If dependent learners entrust their teachers or tutors with the responsibility to set the parameters for their learning, in accordance with the assessment requirements for the course, how is that relationship affected, if the tutor is seen as rejecting that role and how might this breakdown in trust affect the students' engagement with the learning process?

Course developers have a responsibility to address the needs of all learners. Sadler-Smith and Smith (2004) suggest input on learning-to-learn as one effective strategy. However, this risks designing a solution before the learners' needs are fully understood. Indeed, one could argue that a model that focuses initially on the teacher's response to overcoming the perceived obstacles to learning, rather than attempting to understand the learners' needs, is at variance with personalised learning. This solution-focused method was the course developers' initial approach, and seemed to be in line with government agendas (cited in Johnson, 2004:2).

An alternative, learner-centred approach would be to provide opportunities and support for learners to engage with a Johari window-style approach (Luft and Ingham, 1955), enabling students to identify what they know, what they don't know, and what they don't know that they don't know, thereby encouraging them to adopt a meta-learning approach. Once these needs are articulated, the role of the teacher as facilitator comes to the fore, working in partnership with the learner to identify and provide 'struts' to support each learner's journey along their own personalised continuum.

Conclusion

A good answer is … like a candle in the dark. It provides both light and mystery. It should, of course, illuminate, while at the same time reveal the contours of the unknown so that the listener can surmise that there is much more to be investigated and learned.

(Lipman et al., 1980:203)

The candle metaphor represents what the course developers thought they were doing when revising the education studies course. However, what became apparent was that barriers to independent learning had not been adequately identified. Motivations for choosing a distance learning course need to be further explored. The candle may illuminate 'the contours of the unknown' for most learners, but for those who are unaware that there is more to be illuminated, the model is inappropriate.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OEDC), independent learning is a prerequisite 'for successful learning in future life' (1999, cited in Harlen, 2007:24). However, if teachers and student teachers struggle with their own ability to engage independently in learning, their effectiveness in enabling pupils to become independent learners may be compromised. This inability to engage with independent learning may in turn have implications for all phases of education.

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