Chapter 5
Policy-making to Promote Personalised Learning

by
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Ruano-Borbalan traces the history of ideas and knowledge about learning to discuss the issue of “personalization” with particular reference to France. An original characteristic of recent centuries, he argues, has been the development of massive systems to codify and reproduce society and a marked feature of such systems has been the form of their schools, classes and lessons. This is “efficient” when it comes to social reproduction and socialisation into society’s values but not in terms of knowledge acquisition, learning capacity, and autonomy. Because every human story is different, learning reflexes cannot be dictated, in any case not by policy makers. But we can make a variety of activities and knowledge available to learners, in a range of educational situations and then let them decide “on their own”, according to their preferences and personalities, how to progress and learn.

The context and challenge of the personalisation agenda

The energy that contemporary societies devote to educating and training the population is considerable. An original characteristic of recent centuries has been the development of massive systems to codify and organise forms and reproduce society. In OECD countries, these education and training systems absorb between a fifth and a quarter of central government funds as well as a notable share of corporate turnover, apart from what individuals and families provide in terms of financial and in-kind contributions. Dating back to the Renaissance, this form has helped shape civil society and the nation state. It is historically linked to the “classic” culture forged by the

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governing classes. This culture became ossified in the 19th and 20th centuries and has remained – to the point of caricature in some countries like France – the prestigious inspiration of the entire initial education system and even adult learning, at least on the more general courses.

Since the 19th century, a marked feature of these systems has been the form of their schools, classes and lessons. Western-style education, which has now spread throughout the world, is characterised by the four “ones”: one teacher, one class, one lesson and one subject. Teaching content is ultimately determined by two imperatives – academically-defined knowledge based on research, and general civic knowledge required of citizens in society. This system is widespread and “efficient” when it comes to social reproduction and socialisation into the standards and values laid down by the evolving state i.e. the common culture. However, this system is flawed in ways familiar to education scientists almost since the time of Rousseau as well as, of course, to students – it does not work efficiently for everyone in terms of knowledge acquisition, learning capacity, and autonomy.

Millions of pupils across the globe are learning but the returns to education can be extraordinarily low. In France, for instance, more than 100 000 teachers try to inculcate the rudiments of English, “the language of Shakespeare”, but to little avail. The country’s elite may be proficient in the international language but this is helped considerably by much determination and financial effort by their families. If change is taking place in this regard, my hypothesis would be (the situation is not well understood due to lack of relevant research) that it is because of society and individuals themselves, not because of efficient education content and methods being used to teach the language.

There is nothing new in noting this. The novelty may lie instead in that government circles have been won over by a new belief, developed and disseminated by academic economists for some forty years and relayed by the institutions of international co-operation. It holds that the main factor behind economic growth stems from the quality and productivity of our education systems. In this context, David Miliband (Chapter 1) has endeavoured to show how crucial innovation is in the field of personalised learning for today’s social and education systems. Without actually quoting them, he drew inspiration from the work of social thinkers and philosophers

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1 The fact that this is a “belief” does not mean that it is wrong: we all believe that the earth is a sphere measuring 40 000 km in circumference, revolving around the sun and maintained in orbit by the force of gravity. Admittedly we have no proof of this, and we base our belief on our trust in science which has developed the theory and confirmed it by analogy or deduction. The same goes for the economic theories now prevailing in international organisations.
like Jurgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck and, of course, Anthony Giddens on the subject of reflexive society and democratic space. He concludes that learners should be put “at the heart of the education system”.

To this continental listener at the seminar, “putting learners at the heart of the system” sounded strangely dated. It was a goal of France’s political and trade-union left-wing in the 1980s, and became the core concept of France’s 1989 Education Act, initiated by Lionel Jospin who was later to become the socialist Prime Minister. Such determination to put learners at the centre of the system flopped in the land of Zinedine Zidane and Voltaire. France’s 1989 Education Act was a final blow in the age-old battle waged by the “école nouvelle” or “new education” movement, the powerful French teaching unions, and the Left in general – and it was its swan song. After 1989, the emphasis switched to learning, discipline, combating violence in schools, values (including the debate on Muslim headscarves in schools, which remains so incomprehensible to many outside France), and school performance – all of which have preoccupied governments, education authorities and the general public alike.

Genuine concern with educational innovation and differentiated or personalised learning dates back to a previous era, and the Act marked the arrival in office of a small proportion of teachers who had advocated the concept in schools twenty years earlier. Broadly, the idea of personalised learning and similar educational innovations emerged in experiments in the 1970s. But it lost ground in the 1980s, even though its advocates came to power and wrote it into the Education Act, and it has virtually disappeared since. To put this in context, in France as in other OECD countries, societal change – the decline in educational institutions, individualism and changing parent-child relations – has altered relationships within schools and the classroom.

In terms of social doctrine and educational debate, however, the case appears to be clear, as highlighted in a recent report by the French Commission du débat national sur l’avenir de l’école (Commission for the National Debate on the Future of Education), which mobilised input from over a million people from September 2003 to March 2004. In nearly 600 pages, only seven of them address the issue of “pupil heterogeneity” encountered by lower secondary teachers in delivering the same basic curriculum to all children uniformly. The report’s emphasis is on the system, education and the need to ensure attainment in the institutional and educational context as it stands, rather than on adaptation or personalisation. The very words “learner”, “educational innovation” and “personalised learning” are scarcely to be found. In short, there has been a return to a classic approach to knowledge and learning, whereby teachers and schools transmit knowledge and ensure that it is learnt.
Education policy convergence

I was thus curious at the seminar to listen to a minister winning round a room of education officers with a discourse that economists believe to be innovative but which is familiar to French educational scientists and regarded as institutionally outmoded. It is tempting to believe that the French education system, archetypically centralised, is and will remain unique, with institutions and an ideological and educational rationale all of its own: but, this would be too simple. For, in every area of governance, OECD member countries are converging and, despite profound disparities, are eventually adopting similar evaluation and operating criteria. To be sure, my country is centralised, with a uniform curriculum and a discourse on the broad civic role played by school and education that sets it apart from Northern European or American systems. But in practice, it has just as many different forms of educational innovation and learning situation. And, over the past twenty years decentralised systems have also shifted towards standard-setting for individual subjects and general knowledge. The institutional outcome has been a narrowing of the gap between systems, particularly with regard to how schools operate. Whether decentralised or not, education systems are converging and governments are using similar rationales to justify very similar policies.

Crucially however, despite policy convergence and common goals, policy performance has been disappointing – everywhere. Why? Part of the answer may be found in a recent comparative micro-social study by the Belgian researcher Sabine Kahn (2003) on school reform in Belgium and Quebec. It highlights institutional and human resistance to any attempt at enhancing individual learning to improve the way education systems function. Specifically, the Belgian and Quebec reforms are worthwhile measures seeking high attainment for all and are doing away with redoublement (repeating a year). In both cases, says Kahn, it is a question of accepting that pupils are different and practising a form of education that takes those differences into account. A related aim – as it has long been throughout the OECD area – is for assessment to be formative rather than summative. Yet the evidence from the schools and primary classes in the study shows that ultimately teacher commitment and understanding are crucial when introducing new learning systems.

Take the example of redoublement, which has long been known to have stigmatising and harmful long-term consequences. Sabine Kahn points out that a majority of teachers – unlike the advocates of reform – are still in favour of this practice. Teachers possess representations and behavioural and cognitive routines which impede the introduction of learning situations that foster pupil autonomy. Such routines are also seen by the teachers as the
expression of sound common sense. They know that the traditional form of classroom teaching is and will remain an appropriate response to the perhaps leading function of the education system, namely social and professional selection. It is not the sole aim of education to foster the development of every human being. While this utopian vision expresses a sound liberal principle, it clashes not only with the philosophical and political imperative of democratisation but also with the reality of professional and social selection, which is one of the key functions of education. Most teachers, pupils and parents believe that the traditional structure of classroom teaching, however archaic and difficult it may be, should not be called into question.

**Human learning occurs at many levels**

And so the question remains: given these constraints, and going beyond the discourse of certain economists, political analysts and politicians, how can we promote personalised learning at school? How can we enable children to learn? How can we ensure that, educational realities being what they are, individuals can enhance their innovative potential? After all, they are the ones doing the learning, and no educational programme or forecast can predict the unique path that a person will take towards (or away from) knowledge and learning. Because every human story is different, learning reflexes cannot be dictated, in any case not by policy makers. What we can do, as educationalists and psychologists have long maintained, is make a variety of activities and knowledge available to learners, in a range of educational situations. We can then let them decide “on their own”, according to their preferences and personalities, how to progress and learn. No one can be forced to do this, but fortunately people are social animals, driven by an irrepressible need to discover and learn.

This is not a case of wishful thinking about how the education and training system, as an integral part of society at large, can be radically and definitively reformed and transformed to foster autonomous education and learning. Such a vision would make no sense. What does make sense is the observation that society has reached a “second modernity” – to use a term coined by the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991) – a gap between the dominant form of authority and knowledge transmission in the school system, on the one hand, and the scope for individuals to act and reflect, on the other. For societies on the cutting edge of technology, co-operation, networking and free, personalised learning are both prerequisites and imperatives for political, economic and social development.

Although the focus here has been on human learning and on how it can be promoted and enhanced, other aspects of and requirements for such
learning also need to be highlighted. Apart from the mechanisms and conditions for cognitive development, there are two further issues, the first being the nature of knowledge and learning, and the second the role of learning groups and educational mediators (e.g. teachers and educators). Knowledge and content are burning issues, though expressed differently in different countries and levels of education. Subject-specific didactics, types of knowledge, know-how and inter-personal skills, together with self-teaching and on-line training using new information and communication technologies, figure prominently in education debates. Research into learning has focused heavily on the ownership of knowledge by learners. Debates recognise the importance of what people should be able to do rather than merely what education and training institutions and the business world require of them. Such discussion has shown how useful it is to link the social dimension to the purely cognitive aspects of acquiring knowledge and skills.

In this respect, consideration of how to use technology in education and especially for distance learning has been fruitful, illusions about its potential notwithstanding. It has raised the issue of self-teaching which the new communication tools were aimed to promote, and has questioned the traditional structure of education, the role of educators and teachers, and specific issues relating to knowledge acquisition by learners (such as motivation when alone, forms of navigation and course). Though not necessarily intended to replace traditional forms, the new modes of learning and education, often devised from necessity such as physical distance, are valuable test-beds for innovation. They are not the only ones: teachers in charge of students with various forms of disability have also had to introduce personalised forms of learning. It would be wise to look carefully at these experiences and innovations to gain insights into what could be transferable to mainstream teaching.

Finally, there is the role of teaching specialists and learner groups. Learning is a personal process but it requires the assistance of an educator to facilitate acquisition and mediate between the knowledge passed to, and that built up by, the learner. Hence, the role of educators and their pedagogical and subject-specific skills are central issues to be debated – the role of educators and their style of teaching, their motivation and energy, the physical resources at their disposal and their teaching methods, including how they relate to the socio-cultural profile of their pupils. Only the learner’s own cognitive characteristics are more important in explaining learning outcomes.

Social psychology and the analysis of learning groups remind us of how closely interlinked are all the players involved. The presence of others and social interplay are – as in many social situations – powerful motivations for
action and learning. Three propositions are central to personalised learning and should help guide consideration of pedagogical and didactic approaches which include some element of self-instruction along with proposed educational activities and content:

- First, learning is a complex individual process, contingent on the identity of the learner who controls the pace of his/her learning and motivation.
- Second, people learn better in a co-operative environment together with their peers.
- Third, people would not know what to learn if educators/mediators were not there to help introduce them to what or how to learn.

An outstanding question then is how to promote proposals with the many different institutions and players involved when they enjoy a large degree of autonomy. An initial answer could be the production and dissemination of substantiated knowledge on the mechanisms of human learning – there is clear need for a resource centre on recognised knowledge and skills in the field of human learning. The first and most pressing step is to construct a system for observing, discussing and defining academic knowledge. This is no simple undertaking, of course, and would go beyond anything so far attempted or experimented within any country. Barriers to doing so stem largely from the ideologies and cultures prevailing in the administrative and political machinery. But they are also inherent to the fields of psychology, social science and educational practice in which symbolic and academic hierarchies and the frontiers of knowledge create divides that prevent much-needed communication between the different actors involved.

This suggests the solution of an international think-tank on human learning. Its remit might cover: first, mapping areas where the knowledge base is already robust (and we do know a considerable amount); second, analysing key areas that are still at issue and pose problems; and third identifying uncharted areas that require research. Such a think-tank should work in a broad field covering not only the socio-institutional aspects of the external learning environment and the psychological aspects of motivation and “internal” constraints, but also adult education, early childhood education, pedagogy, learning methods, and cognitive psychology pertaining to knowledge. To enhance the learning environment and hence individual differentiation or personalised learning will require such an effort and we otherwise risk being stuck with amnesia and inertia. An institutional instrument for the evaluation, elaboration and dissemination of academic research and knowledge on learning and education is crucial. It should be
international and could be of assistance to a wide variety of those engaged in education, e.g. families, pupils, teachers, school heads and administrators, encouraging them towards a change in practice, gradually perhaps but in a sustainable way.

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