

# **'Personalising learning' for secondary students working in a 'blended (*distance/f2f/vocational*) learning environment'**

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## **Introduction**

In this paper we examine how the experiences of our senior secondary students have, and are changing in quite fundamental ways. In short, the experience of many senior secondary students has gone from one characteristic of a traditional classroom environment, to one occurring in more hybrid circumstances that involve a mixture of classroom, vocational, and distance education modes. Consequently, we use the expression, 'blended learning environment' to describe this new working arrangement.

Our intended audience is the secondary teachers, particularly those in middle and senior management, of our rural secondary and area schools. The purpose of this paper is to not only raise the issues surrounding this emerging reality, but also look at some of the ways 'we', as local schools may respond to the challenge of 'personalising learning' for our senior secondary students who operate in this 'blended learning environment'.

Using Roxburgh Area School and several of its students as a case study, we will examine the nature of this 'emerging new reality' and explore these questions:

- What has changed? What can we see when we look at students' subject choices and the way students received these courses in 2000 compared with now?
- What factors may be driving this change?
- How are these changes impacting students and the school?

Framed from a perspective of 'personalising learning', we will explore ways in which schools may respond proactively to this emerging new reality. A proactive rather than reactive approach being the most desired, to better ensure the experience of this new 'blended learning environment' meets students' needs, is educationally successful and satisfying, and furthermore, equitable. Moreover, we look at distance education from the 'other' end - not from the teaching or delivery side, but from the student 'experience', with the ultimate aim being how local schools can respond.

With that said, underpinning this paper is an appeal to schools to look very seriously at how they can develop 'deep support' systems which will facilitate all their students to work in this rich, but nevertheless challenging, 'blended learning environment' so they can become empowered lifelong learners.

## An emerging new reality – a 'blended learning' environment

*"Trying to prefect an education system that is fundamentally designed to give young people things they no longer need is not a responsible pursuit... The demands of the twenty-first century are different from those of the nineteenth"* (Claxton, 2006, p. 3)

In just over five years the environment, in which a growing number of senior secondary students work, particularly those in smaller rural schools, has altered dramatically. Increasingly these students are operating in a 'blended environment' - an environment in which they are sometimes learning through various distance education mediums (particularly videoconferencing and the World Wide Web), at other times a vocational setting, and at times in traditional 'face to face' classes. Indeed, in small schools like Roxburgh Area School, working in such a 'blended environment' is now the norm, rather than the exception, for most Year 12 and 13 students. To highlight how significant this change has been, we contrast the pattern of the educational experience of Roxburgh's senior secondary students in the year 2000 with those observed now.

### 2000

In the year 2000, the senior secondary curriculum had been fairly stable for a long period of time (decades), and consisted mainly of core 'academic' subjects – English, Maths, Science (which split into Biology, Chemistry and Physics at Year 12), Geography or History, Economics, and a few 'practical' subjects like Art, Graphics, Text and Information Management, Home Economics and Workshop Technology. As students advanced from Years 11, a greater degree of subject choice often became available. However, due to the size of Roxburgh, and other similar small schools, this 'choice,' in reality, was largely limited to pursuing either a sciences, or social sciences, or more 'technical' based pathway through senior school. A small number of students, known to be '*good independent learners*', were usually 'allowed' to do other subjects, such as languages, music or accounting, through the then only significant secondary distance education provider, The Correspondence School<sup>1</sup> (TCS).

Subjects were highly prescribed to meet the requirements of School Certificate, Sixth Form Certificate and University Bursary – and students who didn't 'pass' these subjects, in turn, often repeated them the following year. In 2000, the majority of Roxburgh students were staying at school until the end of their Y13 year.

Because of the rural depopulation, and the school's roll having fallen sharply over the previous few years, offering a broad senior curriculum was becoming almost impossible. This resulted in most students doing very similar courses, due to limited resources.

*(Note 1 – The Open Polytechnic of NZ also played a minor role supplying a few vocationally orientated courses)*

## Now (2007)

The current landscape in which our senior secondary students operate is very different. It is characterised by:

- **a diversity of students' subject choice** - almost all of our students have a unique combination of subjects. In Year 11 only a third of students have the identical subjects of another student at school. No two Year 12 or Year 13 students have the same combination.
- **a breadth of curriculum** in terms of subjects available.
- **increased participation in distance education** - the percentage of students has risen markedly. Approximate 70 percent of Years 11-13 students are enrolled in one or more subjects done through distance education. The number of providers offering courses is growing rapidly and the technologies being used to deliver these courses is diversifying. Videoconferencing (VC) has become the current dominant delivery medium. While TCS is still a significant DE provider, particularly for languages (we currently have students doing German, Japanese, French & Spanish), they are no longer the primary provider. The majority of courses are now received through OtagoNet (and from other schools involved in the national network of VC clusters, the Virtual Learning Network)
- **a growing number of students involved in learning within workplace settings.** Approximately a third of Roxburgh's senior students participate in the Gateway Programme which involves students' in formalised learning arrangements in an actual workplace.
- **access to a growing tertiary courses using online mediums.** Several universities (Waikato, Canterbury and Lincoln), polytechnics (Telford & Otago), and other tertiary training providers (e.g. Natcol, Travel & Tourism) have developed a range of courses which

Roxburgh students have participated in.

A number of elements have remained constant:

- the number of courses taught in 'face to face' classes is relatively the same.
- The same core of compulsory subjects also still exists. All Year 11 students still must do English, Maths and Science, and Y12 students, English and Maths. However, within these subjects teachers are now customising their courses to the particular needs and interests of their students. This is achieved by designing courses around different standards for different classes and/or for individual students.

The overwhelming majority of our students now experience their schooling in a 'blended learning environment', where they still do the majority of learning in a classroom with a 'face to face' teacher, but also learn in distance education and/or workplace settings. Here we describe three 'typical' students to illustrate how our students participate in this 'blended environments':

- Student 'A' is a Year 13 girl following a traditional academic pathway and intending to go to university next year. At school Student 'A' learns English, Maths with Calculus and Maths with Statistics in regular 'face to face' classes. She takes two subjects online L3 Accounting and L3 Economics – neither of these are offered at Roxburgh, nor through OtagoNet, so she participates in classes run by North Island clusters. Each of these classes involves a weekly 1 hour videoconference lesson, and additional participation in online learning environments. Last year Student 'A' also took Accounting and Economics online, gaining good results in L2 NCEA assessment.
- Student 'B', also a Year 13 girl, intends to go to polytechnic next year to do a course in veterinary nursing. She is learning L2 Maths and L3 Biology in regular 'face to face' classes; Equine studies in an online, videoconference based course offered by Telford Rural Polytechnic; and Vet Nursing via a paper-based course (with some use of the OLE 'Blackboard', and email support from tutors) offered through Otago Polytechnic. To meet the practical requirement of the vet nursing she attends three to four day block courses each term at the polytechnic in Dunedin. Student 'B' is also involved in the Gateway programme, working with an Alexandra vet for half a day every week.
- Student 'C' is a Year 12 boy. Although he has achieved reasonably well, and gained a L1 NCEA, he lacks motivation for traditional school subjects. He is learning L2 English, L2 Maths and L2 Engineering in regular 'face to face' classes; and L2 Agriculture through a videoconference based course offered by Telford Rural Polytechnic. Student 'C' is involved

for the second year in Gateway at a local motorcycle workshop for half a day per week. At this worksite and at school he is working on automotive and engineering unit standards, possibly towards a motorcycle mechanics apprenticeship.

Although many students are still choosing to take traditional ‘academic’ subjects throughout their Year 11 to 13 schooling, each student’s course is characterised by ‘choice’. Virtually all students have chosen courses which are at least slightly different than other students at Roxburgh Area School, based on their personal interests, aptitude in subjects and desired or likely career paths. Virtually all students in the senior school are involved in either distance education or the vocationally based Gateway Programme, and in many cases both. This ‘blended learning environment’ of distance, vocational and traditional ‘face to face’ learning can now be considered the ‘typical’ learning environment of the senior school.

## Catalysts for change

We need to consider why this change has happened. Why, after many years of a very stable and a fairly generic senior secondary schooling model, has this new reality is emerging? What elements can be identified as factors contributing to this emerging new reality? In fact, a number of catalysts for change can be identified.

Around 2000, the system was under considerable stress. In the late 1990s, Roxburgh, like many other rural schools, suffered sharply falling school rolls. The impact of this was most keenly felt in the senior secondary area of schools, which struggled to maintain a viable curriculum to meet the needs of students at this level. The threat of ‘network review’ leading to possible school closure seemed a very real threat to many small rural schools at the time. Additionally, the then strongly competitive model also translated into an all time low in collaboration between schools and teachers. The survival of the small, rural school was very much at stake.

Despite these pressures, Otago’s rural secondary and area schools had managed to maintain close working relationships, and in 2002 responded by establishing OtagoNet. The vision of OtagoNet was “***To create a broadband VPN linking the Otago Secondary and Area Schools to strengthen existing relationships and collaboration of these rural and geographically dispersed schools.***” (an extract from OtagoNet’s ICTPD project plan<sup>2</sup>). As a result of this vision, Year 12 and 13 courses using

videoconferencing began to be offered between these schools. In the first year, thirteen different senior courses became available through OtagoNet, significantly extending the available curriculum in the smaller schools. Today, the number of courses offered continues to rise (in 2007, 25 courses were offered) and has been extended to include some classes involving younger year levels.

*(Note 2 – a copy of OtagoNet ICTPD project plan is available from Ken Pullar - email: [ken@roxburgh.school.nz](mailto:ken@roxburgh.school.nz))*

For a brief time, The Correspondence School (TCS) played a key role in leading the change. They worked closely with OtagoNet, as an associate member, significantly extending the offerings of videoconference based courses available to the OtagoNet schools. The establishment of the eSection within TCS, under Derek Wenmoth's leadership, saw a period significant innovation - alternative distance education models were developed, which explored new pedagogical strategies (based on current socio-constructivist learning theory) and began to beneficially exploit 'new technologies'. Consequently, for 2 to 3 years TCS were active agents of change, until the demise of the eSection. When this transpired, the TCS soon largely retreated back to its traditional, mail-based, correspondence model. For many schools, however, 'the genie was out of the bottle,' so to speak and there was no putting it back – the traditional offering of TCS were now firmly viewed as a 'last resort' distance education option for schools.

Other regionally based rural clusters of schools, based on similar models to OtagoNet, have also evolved. Nationally there are currently sixteen clusters. Another development has been the establishment of the 'Virtual Learning Network' (VLN) – a network of school clusters, and other educational institutions, involved in providing online education (predominantly using videoconferencing). Through the VLN, clusters offer any spare space they have in their online classes to other schools around NZ in a reciprocal arrangement. So while students in OtagoNet schools are primarily enrolled in OtagoNet classes, they also have access to a wide range of courses from other clusters (- in 2007 a total of 137 different courses were registered on the VLN). Several tertiary providers, including Telford & Otago Polytechnics and Canterbury, Lincoln, & Waikato Universities also offer courses. And there has been particularly rapid growth in this area, extending a range of university and vocationally-based courses which had previously not been available in secondary schools.

Another very significant catalyst for change has been the progressive introduction of new standards-based NCEA qualification system since 2001. This new qualification system has further

allowed teachers to customise courses in flexible ways to better acknowledge the interest and capabilities of their students, and also implement more innovative and accommodating approaches to assessment.

The 'Gateway' programme introduced in 2002 at Roxburgh (and most other schools since) has allowed senior students to learn and gain qualifications in workplace settings. This has resulted in raising the status of vocational courses, which are increasingly becoming viewed as viable alternative pathways to the more singular and traditional academic path.

Other elements which are also at play in this 'emerging new reality' include developments with new communications technologies and reliable broadband infrastructure. These are allowing a blending of 'e'technologies, resulting in a much 'richer' array of online learning environments. Associated with these technologies has been a growing awareness of new socio-constructivist pedagogies.

These complex and interacting factors may provide an example of 'self organisation'<sup>3</sup> at work. A new stable 'identity' or model of senior secondary schooling is yet to emerge. Perhaps we are beginning to see the shape of 'a' new model in the experience of small rural area and secondary schools like Roxburgh.

If this indeed is an example of self organisation in practice, then we need to explore the implications, and consider how we can facilitate the process of emergence. In this next section we try to capture some of the consequences, as experienced by students working in this new 'blended learning environment', and by schools. We then look closely at the theoretical framework of 'personalising learning' as a lens to interpret this change, and as a means of looking forward with some suggestions of strategies schools may consider adopting to adapt to the challenges of students working in this new 'blended learning environment'.

(Note 3 – for further information on 'complexity' and 'self organisation' in education refer to Fullan, M (2001) and Pace Marshall, S (2006) )

## **Consequences – how are students experiencing learning in a ‘blended learning environment’?**

This section is not a formal analysis of the 'new reality' in terms of its impact and consequences, rather notes made from interviews where student talked about their experiences of learning in a 'blended environment'. We haven't tried to categorize these experiences, because often an experience perceived as a negative, or problem was seen differently by others – each learner experiences working in this blended learning environment differently. Here are some of the ideas expressed:

- The key benefit for almost everyone was that they could do particular subjects that they wouldn't ordinarily have been able to do. Distance education and Gateway options were giving them the choice to do exactly what they wanted to do.
- Students enjoy the practical, 'hands on' dimension of Gateway (and some distance education course). They liked learning in context.
- They were learning in quite a different way to 'normal', which required a lot more self discipline, however regular weekly videoconferences made this easier (as did the occasional face to face' meeting of the class). It gave them a chance to check up on what they were doing.
- Students enjoyed videoconference sessions because they could do the subject with other students (- not alone like traditional correspondence courses). They do feel part of a 'class', and therefore felt more committed to 'keep up with the class' and get things done which needed to be done before a scheduled VC.
- Some 'virtual relationships' have developed into strong friendships and resulting in peer networks across Otago. (- this can be very important to students growing up in small rural school with limited peer groups)
- Students often felt overwhelmed by competing commitments – often several assignments would be due at the same times, and then there would be very quiet time when little was expected. They felt they little control over managing this workload.
- Most students felt they had a lot more homework to do for their distance education classes than their 'face to face' classes. They felt that this was partly because the one VC period was largely spent talking (- perceived as 'not working'). A lot of tasks were set during the VC period and then they only have a limited amount of school time to do the work (- the

- other three timetabled hours were not nearly enough). It can be harder to maintain motivation than in ‘face to face’ classes, where you have daily contact with your teachers
- Although most students enjoy their regular VC and times in workplaces, they didn’t like having to miss regular ‘face to face’ classes to do so. They were resigned to the fact that this had to happen, but worried about missing out on things which happened in their ‘face to face’ classes while they are away and also have to catch up missed work. Some students were better than others at catching up on missed work
  - Not having ready access to a teacher when one was needed to check understanding or negotiate meaning was a significant issue. Many students had developed good strategies for handling this situation (emailing their eTeacher, asking another teacher at school for assistance)
  - Working in this blended environment is perceived of as being a significantly bigger challenge, with more demands and a need to be much more organised than just doing ‘face to face’ subjects (“you’ve got to be self driven”). Not all students felt they were handling this challenge well. They do not however regret choosing particular Gateway and Distance Education options.
  - Having someone (a teacher) at their own school who was taking an interest , offering regular encouragement (“someone who understands what you are going through”) and support for their learning is considered very important.

Classroom teachers also find it difficult loosing one or two students from their class on a regular basis (and having different students away on different days). They have experienced the problem of students not making an attempt to catch up on missed work. There is also pressure from students for teachers to make themselves available to catch up on work by holding a personal tutorial in non teaching times.

For schools things become increasingly complex, and potentially very messy. It is therefore very important for the school to keep a careful eye on every learner – to watch for the stress of students learning in unfamiliar ways. There is a need for ongoing dialogue with each student to ensure that the learning experience in this ‘blended environment’ is progressing satisfactorily.

## A theoretical framework - ‘Personalising learning’

**“Personalised learning is an idea for our time. It’s recognition of human uniqueness – we are not trying to turn out assembly-line children. It means redesigning our schools to fit the pupils rather than what we do now, which is to force them to fit into existing structures. It means a focus on learning, learning for understanding, learning for meaning and giving people time” (Fink, 2005)**

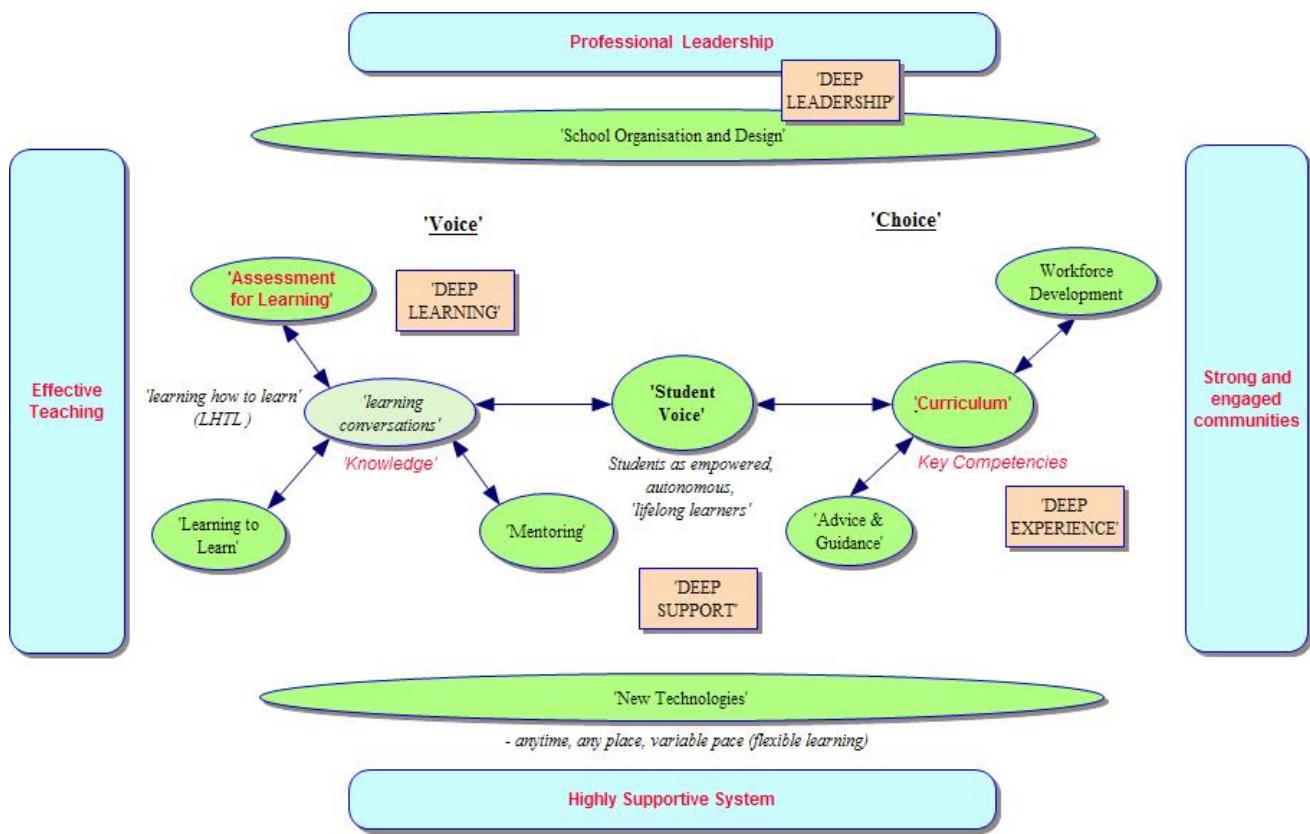
A ‘Personalising learning’ framework provides us with a particularly powerful means to not only make sense of the change which has occurred, but it also provides us with a ‘compelling, driving conceptualisation’ which has ‘collective moral purpose’ (Fullan, 2005, p66) to guide future development.

There is no single definition of what ‘personalising learning’ may mean. Our definition is drawn directly from a quote by Hon Steve Maharay (Minister of Education) -

**“Personalised learning involves thinking about knowledge as an active process. Students get to be informed, active participant in their own learning, they contribute to decisions about what learning can work best for them, and they have a much better understanding of how they are progressing.”**

(Maharay S. in “Let’s talk about Personalising Learning (p1), Ministry of Education, 2006)

Figure 1: ‘A framework for thinking about Personalising Learning’

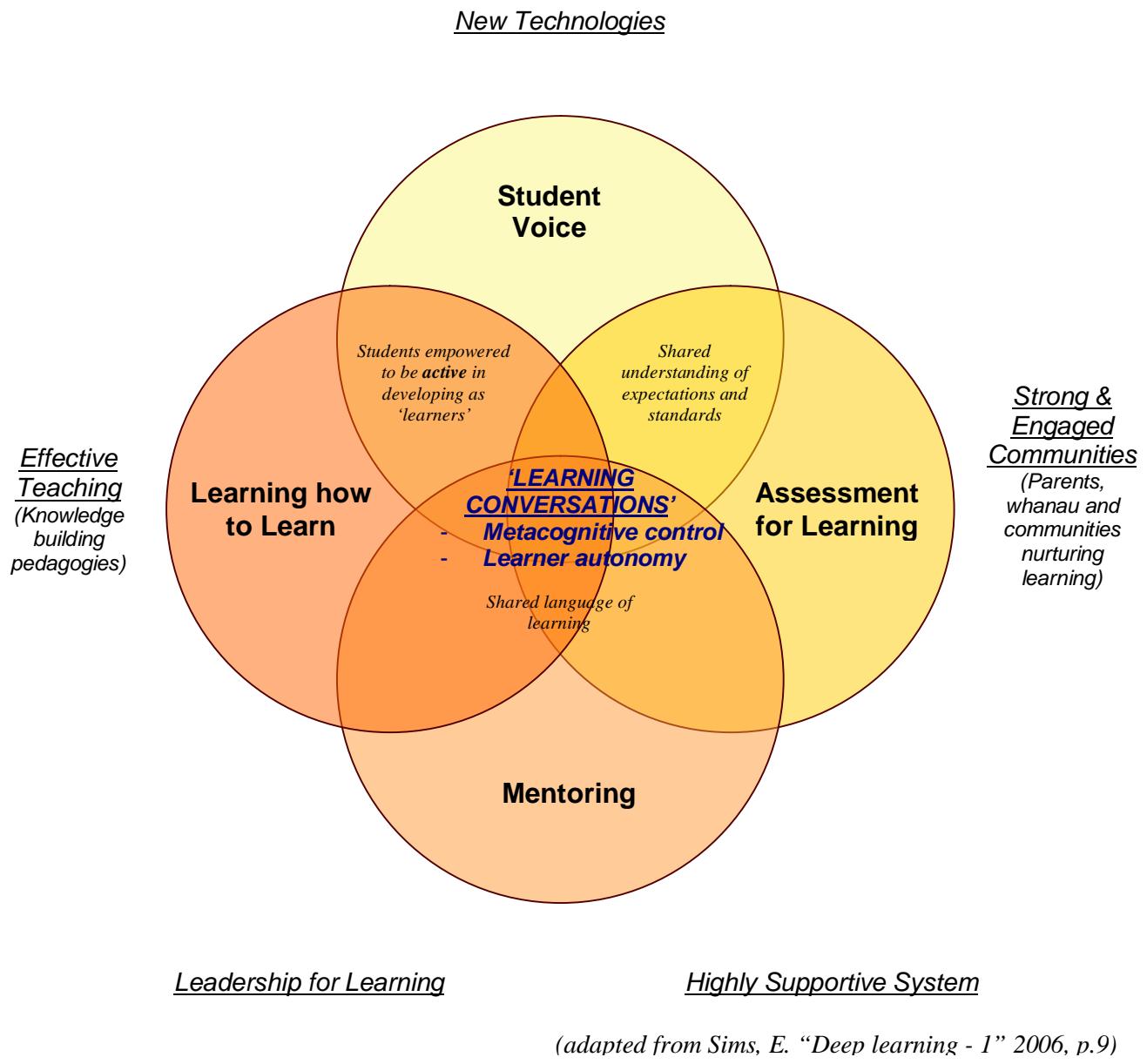


A framework for thinking about personalising learning is presented graphically in *Figure 1*. This is a synthesis of concepts drawn from several sources, primarily: the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE, 2006); David Hargreaves (2004) work in the UK on nine interconnected ‘gateways’ to personalising learning; and the ideas of others expressed in the OECD publication “Schooling for tomorrow: Personalising Education” (OECD, 2006). Our diagram arranges Hargreaves nine ‘gateways’ (***Curriculum, Learning to learn, Workforce development, Assessment for learning, School organisation and design, New technologies, Student voice, Advice and guidance, & Mentoring***), located in the green ovals, and aligns them with the elements of personalised learning identified in the NZ document (***Effective teaching, Assessment for learning, Curriculum, Strong and engaged communities, & a Highly supportive system***), which are highlighted in ‘red’ fonts.

Within our framework, we seek to emphasize the dual themes of ‘choice’ and ‘voice’, not as an either/or alternative, but as a necessary, complementary binary which is essential to a vision of all learners as engaged, empowered autonomous ‘lifelong learners’. David Miliband (OECD, 2006) emphasises this declaring “***the importance of the concepts of “choice” and “voice” as fundamental to the personalisation agenda***” (p21). Student ‘voice’ which develops agency over own learning is seen as vital. Scardamalia and Bereiter (1996) argue forcefully that traditional schooling practice, limits learning and knowledge building skills and dispositions which are vital for all student to function successfully as empowered citizens in a 'Knowledge Society'. While the concept of ‘student voice’ may be seen as implied in the ministry’s document, “*Let’s talk about Personalising Learning*” (Ministry of Education, 2006), we believe a much stronger, more explicit statement of the importance of developing ‘student voice’ is central to personalising learning.

We see an absolute requirement for sustained dialogue and guidance, or what we term ‘learning conversations’, powerful conversations about learning, as a primary means of developing student ‘voice’. Using an adapted schema developed by Emma Sims (2006) we combine and emphasise several of Hargreaves ‘interacting gateways’, for conceptualising key dimensions surrounding our ‘learning conversations’ (refer *Figure 2*).

**Figure 2: ‘Learning Conversations’ for ‘Deep Learning’**



The gateways and elements found at the periphery of the ‘Personalising Learning Framework’ (**Figure 1**) are seen as integral and woven through the central ‘voice’ and ‘choice’ gateways. Family and whanau (‘strong and engaged communities’) are seen as vital participants in the dialogue that nurture learner development, the ‘learning conversation’. Similarly the use of ‘new technologies’ provides a medium to support and enrich ‘learning conversations’ and ‘curriculum’ choice.

One additional theme runs through the New Zealand discussion on personalising learning, which we believe is important, and this is the importance of a new meaning of ‘knowledge’. Jane Gilbert (2005) perhaps best articulates the change by describing ‘knowledge’ as changing from a noun to a verb - meaning that ‘knowledge’ today should be seen as a ‘process’, rather than ‘content’. It is about doing things, using knowledge to make new knowledge, rather than just about learning or memorising stuff. Sanna Jarvela (OECD, 2006) of Finland, similarly emphasises this theme by identifying “knowledge construction and knowledge sharing” (p 33) as core processes of learning. She calls for the development of ‘collaborative knowledge-building’ pedagogical models, tools and practices, as critical dimensions of personalising learning.

Personalising learning has at its heart a goal of equity and excellence for all students. If the promise of personalising learning is to be achieved for students working in the emerging new reality which we have described, we believe that schools will need to look closely at the ‘deep support’ they can offer which will support ‘learning conversations’ - ‘voice’, as well as ‘choice’, is essential.

## **Implications for schools - Schools responses to the challenge**

A key question that every school with students working in the 'blended learning environment' described must ask of themselves is, ***how will we ensure a successful educational experience for all students working in this new environment?*** An assumption underpinning this question is that all students will have the same opportunity to participate in this new environment.

The 'emerging new reality' previously described, offer every growing 'student choice'. But for students to work successfully in this 'blended learning environment' requires them to operate as autonomous learner. Opportunity for, and development of, 'student voice' in every aspects of learning and knowledge building processes is therefore critical. This discussion confines itself to a number of ways local schools may respond in beginning to develop a system of 'deep support' for their students who work in this complex, demanding new environment.

At Roxburgh Area School two closely connected initiatives have been explored and are beginning to be implemented. The first is the establishment of the Learning Centre - a new physical 'learning space' for students involved in distance and vocational learning options, where they come to work when not participating with videoconference or workplace learning. The second the introduction of a new teaching position , the 'mentor teacher' (or 'mTeacher'). The roles of this new position are still very much in evolving phase. The goal is to develop this position away from a supervisory focus of the traditional distance education (& Gateway) coordinators, toward a mentoring focus, as someone who is actively supporting the engagement and learning processes of students, encouraging 'learning conversations' that truly give students 'voice' and ownership over their own learning journeys.

These two initiatives are interconnected – mTeachers work in the Learning Centre for all timetabled periods which students are present. Below we discuss both initiatives in more detail, and a number of other initiatives which are beginning to be used (and being contemplated) as tools to support students working in a very challenging 'blended learning environment'.

## The Learning Centre



In 2005, the Learning Centre was established as a learning space for students when they were not involved in 'face to face' classes, or in videoconference session, or away from school in workplace learning. It is fundamentally different from a traditional secondary classroom, in that no whole class teaching occurs here (- some small group teaching does happen).

The photograph above shows a fairly typical scene of students at work in the Learning Centre: the two students to the left are working on their L3 PE – one is getting work from the class site on the internet hosted OLE, while the other is doing work for a major assignment; the girl on the right is sorting out some work by emailing her History teacher; the student centre-right is catching up on some Maths work that she missed due to a regular Economic VC lesson she attends, which clashes with her face to face classes - the mTeacher (not in photo) is helping this student.

The Learning Centre was designed to support this sort of Learning – furniture is arranged for individual and small group learning; there is good access to internet connected computer - 4 PCs and 6 laptops (which can be used anywhere in the room); a few small 'whiteboards' around the room for tutorial and student use; and no obvious 'dominant' teacher area (- the mTeacher instead works alongside particular individual or small groups of students).

## The ‘mTeacher’ – the mentor teacher

men tor | 'men, tÔr |  
**noun**  
an experienced and trusted adviser  
**verb**  
to advise or train (someone, esp. a younger colleague)

The use of the added descriptor of “mentor” when referring to the teachers who help to personalise students’ learning is especially apt. Its synonym, “advisor,” conjures up equally appropriate connotations of advocate and guide. Both words also suggest certain characteristic actions, i.e. to suggest, recommend, inform, encourage, and again, to advocate and guide. This is a marked difference from some of the more traditional associations to teachers – instructor, lecturer, master, mistress, sage, guru, professor, etc. This distinction is deliberate, and a necessary paradigm shifts if students are to develop the capacity to learn autonomously.

*“There is a widespread belief that being an effective, powerful real-life learner is a useful thing to be; and that twenty-first century education should be aiming to help young people develop this generic capacity to learn”*

*(Claxton, 2006, p. 2).*

The most intuitive way to develop this capacity to learn is to empower students to become agents and managers of their own learning. Since this is a role that is often new and somewhat unfamiliar to many students, they need a strong support network in order to assume it.

*“[Personalised learning] assumes that learners should be actively engaged in setting their own targets, devising their own learning plans and goals, choosing among a range of different ways to learn”*

*Charles Leadbeater (OECD, 2006, p. 15).*

Allowing students to be actively engaged in the planning, goal setting, execution and assessment of their learning requires certain qualities and pedagogical approaches from mentor teachers. Some of the qualities of effective teachers that certainly apply to mentoring students in a personalized learning setting are:

- Clear communication skills
- Friendly & approachable
- Modifies & adapts learning to meet students’ personal needs
- Provides personalised guidance
- Provides personalised feedback
- Experienced
- Knowledgeable

- Wise
- Reasonably technically skilled
- Professional
- Able to recognize students as individuals

Additionally, mentor teachers in a personalising learning environment need to be ambassadors for their students to the community and the various professional agencies that form partnerships with schools, and to further support and provide learning opportunities for students.

## **Future possibilities**

As a school, Roxburgh has begun exploring a number of other complementary tools for supporting its students who work in this new, complex landscape. This agenda includes:

- Placing a range of material from ‘face to face’ classes onto class sites on the school intranet, including details of lesson covered by the class, learning resources, exemplars, practice assessments and links to online enrichment activities. With a growing number of students away from their regular lessons (to attend VCs or at workplace locations), the intranet provides a means for students to see what work they have missed, and suggested activities and resources for catching up.
- ‘Personalised Learning Plans’ (PLPs) – the school has a goal of developing a student-controlled PLP for each of its senior students. These will be dynamic documents that evolved through ongoing dialogue (‘learning conversations’) among the student, their teachers, parents, whanau and other pertinent community members (such as Gateway Programme ‘employers’).
- The further development of digital ‘ePortfolios’ – these similarly are personal spaces controlled by the students themselves, containing their PLP, numeracy, literacy and other developmental profiles, and self-selected student work. Importantly, the ePortfolio’s will provide mechanisms to support new online ‘assessment for learning’ practices, such as portfolio assessment and ‘learning stories’.
- Other options include: establishing online tutor or study groups; exploring ways that the Form teachers role can be transformed into the mTeacher role already described; cultivating classroom practices which foster the growth of classes as ‘knowledge building communities’ based around the pedagogy developed by Scardamalia & Bereiter (1999).

One final issue which must be considered, is an absolutely vital and often overlooked dimension of school support for students - the ongoing technical, administrative and liaison support (& training) to ensure the learning experience of student progresses satisfactorily. Because our students are operating increasingly in an online world, it is essential they have access to immediate technical 'trouble shooting' assistance, so that the technology doesn't become a significant barrier to their learning.

While we have presented the model of one school beginning to take seriously the challenge of the 'emerging new reality', other schools are also developing their own models. No one model should be considered a 'best' model. Instead what is important is that each school considers how they provide 'deep support', which enables all their students to participate successfully in a 'blended learning environment'.

## Conclusion

Our discussion has focused on the rapidly changing schooling experience of secondary students in one very small, rural area school. We have tried to use this example to describe and explain an 'emerging new reality' typified by students increasingly learning in the blended environments of the traditional classroom, online distance education, and workplace learning. Regardless of the extent to which the trends we have described can be generalised beyond Roxburgh Area School (and other VLN schools), we strongly advocate a vision of 'personalising learning' for all students.

We identified two key themes of student 'choice' and 'voice' as central elements of 'personalising learning'. The change we have described can be viewed as a growth of the 'choice'. We believe that this must be matched with a similar growth of student 'voice'. Students must be empowered to actively participate in every aspect of learning processes. We believe that this can be achieved through 'learning conversations'.

Unless schools accept the challenge of fostering both 'choice' and 'voice', through the development of 'deep support' systems, the vision of all our young people leaving school as autonomous 'lifelong learners' and empowered citizens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, may go largely unrealised, and instead we may see growing inequalities of opportunity.

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