

Personalised Learning: Trends and Globalisation

Frank van Doorn
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Professor : Dr. Y. M. Hebert
University of Calgary
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The exploration of the ideas of personalised learning and world-systems theory as possibly a means of understanding the coming and going of pedagogical theory and practice over time is of value in the ongoing debate of what has been done and what we should be doing to educate our youth. Personalised learning has had many meanings over the past years and has been practiced in as many ways. The debate has not been over the issue of personalised learning per se, but rather in what context and for what purpose should we have learning.

The following is a reflective narrative in the personalised learning debate. It is an analysis and synthesis based on 20 years of high school teaching practice in Social Studies in the province of Alberta for the Calgary Board of Education primarily in the senior grades, specifically in courses dealing with western history from 1648 to the present, theory and application of politics and economics and my own continuous and varied learning both professionally and personally. I claim no ownership of ideas and where possible I have cited what I can, only the analysis and synthesis are mine. The responsibility of factual error are, of course, also mine.

Today, the term personalised learning seems to be making its reappearance in a form mandated and practiced widely in the UK and scattered throughout the USA in smaller jurisdictions each with its own definition of what personalised learning is (DiMartino, 2005). The recent Personalizing Learning Symposium 2005, held at the University of Calgary, explored the ideas surrounding personalised learning and was a grand illustration of the difference of views and meanings of personalised learning and the potential of its reappearance here in Alberta. Is it similar to the past efforts or is this new model of personalised learning a distinctly new version? If so, what was wrong with the old? And this leads to the overarching question of how and why is it that educational philosophy and practice waxes and wanes? Where do the ripples of thought that become waves of action come from? Are old scripts from dead philosophers or new and powerful CEO's and their own foundations and spin doctors responsible for these ripples? A possible answer, or reason, may be made available through world-systems

analysis (Wallerstein. 2005) and the possible part personalised learning plays in the capitalist world system.

The struggle between society for the state and society for the economy has been long and convoluted. Does the social entity we call a state exist for the economy or does the economy exist for the social entity we call the state? The struggle has often been the source of great cataclysmic wars and of, ironically, great social advancement in justice and civil rights as in the destruction of slavery, the emancipation of women, the ever increasing degree of participation in the electoral process and protection for and the advancement of minorities. Even though these advancements have still to be fulfilled globally it is testament to their voracity that they are growing in most places of the world today. The evolution of education at times has been tied to the needs of both the society and to that of the economy as if they were separate entities. Which of these two entities holds sway at any given time depends greatly on the balance between the needs of the state (participation, values of tolerance and social justice) and the economy (profits, reduced restrictions, flexibility). There are times when they are in agreement, when wealth and, therefore, economic power is required by the state, and others when they are not. Does the “invisible hand” within capitalism actually exist? Or do we have to create a real “hand” to help society? Rather like that chicken and egg story, within today’s era of expanding corporatisation, global integration, individualism and competition, it seems the needs of the state (and its people for social justice) and business in the global economy (for ever greater capitalistic freedom) are at variance with each other. The balance of the social good and a civil and just society versus the corporate good and its bottom line of ever accumulating wealth for its share-holders, is a hot topic of discussion - what does come first? And is personalised learning a part of this global debate?

Personalised learning philosophy: What is it? Where did it come from? What did it do? What philosophy replaced it, or is it replacing? The questions are many, however, and indeed, as a jumping off point, the questions of ‘*what non-personalised learning is*’ and ‘*is not all learning inherently personal?*’ are great leaps into the debate. We are hard pressed to conjure up a

scenario where non-personalised learning can take place (Egan lecture. Personalising Learning Symposium 2005, U of Calgary). If we say that learning is assimilated in the individual whether alone, in a small group, a large classroom or a large crowd in the public square then we can say that learning is personal in some way irrespective of the context in which it is attained. The crucial factor is that the individual has to exist and be in a situation where something, anything, is learned and therefore it is personal (Clarke 2003 p71). Non-personalised learning is perhaps what a computer gets when a program is uploaded into it.

The ‘inanimate’ computer does not assign value to the program and all programs have the same value whether it is a game of chess or a word processing suite or controls to the Space Shuttle. Inherent potential for productivity nor importance is a part of the computer’s “consciousness”. In people, of course, we are always assigning levels of importance or value to anything we hear, see, touch, smell or taste. Everything we experience, that we “upload”, is evaluated and given a level of importance dependent on the situation of the individual. It is not necessarily utilitarian either, sometimes knowing is important in and of itself. Learning, then, is not only personal but highly fluid. The old ‘Proof by Authority and Proof by Science’ principle I teach to my grade 11 class comes to mind. In ‘Proof by Science’ we discover our own world and in ‘Proof by Authority’ we defer to some else to tell us what the world is. To further explain: Life is far too complicated and there is far too much for one to discover everything independently by science and experimentation. We simply do not have the luxury of long enough lifetimes to experience all there is to know. Nor do we have the time to sift through what is useful and important to what we *want* to know. As people sometimes comment ‘there is much useless information out there’. By sheer expediency we must defer at some point to an authority, someone who knows more than you and in whom we trust, to encapsulate what is known into what is essential, more important, less important and trivial. This is where an individual who wishes to know something would find a person who would likely know, an authority, and then ask for their knowledge. Imparting knowledge to the learner then involved the learner determining what was important and seeking the knowledge needed directly at that moment. As

society becomes more complicated and greater numbers of learners end up in more formalised groups of learners a set curriculum of knowledge can then be constructed and it is now the teacher of knowledge who determines importance. Schools were built to house these learners. This becomes ever more complicated and enlarged over time with multiple schools and ever more multiple layers of schooling/education and the decision over what should be in the curricula falls out from the control and conversation of the teacher of knowledge and the learner into the hands of a different and not always knowledgeable new and corrupted “authority”, the governing body of the town, area, region, state who have realised the power of standardised education and have now come to be responsible for the education system. Learning, then, is mass personalised learning determined by the “authority” in a position of power at the time with definite ends and outcomes outlined as to what is important. So, the difficulties become apparent; ‘Proof by Science’ is too time consuming, difficult and progress too slow, people reinvent the wheel, so to speak, over and over. ‘Proof by Authority’ is equally arduous as the learner must trust the authority and that authority could lie for their own purposes.

Different ‘authorities’ and their desired curricula are in contest all the time. Between the political values of dictatorship and democracy the state would require that citizenship and concomitant values of loyalty, obedience, belonging, conformity and participation be of greatest importance. Between the economic values of capitalism and socialism business would have its view of required knowledge, skills and attributes of employees as citizens and how the economy would work. Leaders of religion operate within moral education (theocracies) and many other interests have a stake in the organisation of the people have their own values. Now it appears that personalised learning has everything to do with *intent* of the stake holders promoting it. Who are these “stake holders” and what do they want for our youth of today and tomorrow?

Of particular interest in education is *who* the movers and shakers are of these philosophies (old versus new, liberal versus conservative, constructivist versus prescriptive). Why should their loud “voices” affect classrooms and students in both wealthy and poor locales world wide? Through Wallerstein’s world-systems theory I shall endeavour to explain some

broad general modern economic and social trends to reveal some of the ebbs and flows of education in general and personalised learning specifically.

The industrial revolution of the 1850's through to 1946 required a literate, numerate, docile and replaceable work force. Laissez faire capitalism was practiced nearly universally, business held sway. Schools were created where the virtues of punctuality and obedience were paramount and essential to learning literacy and numeracy and becoming useful and successful in the industrial age. Hebert Spencer's "survival of the fittest" seemed appropriate in school as well as business and society. In the United States, Andrew Carnegie created the system, the Carnegie unit, 1000 hours of seat time, and the assessment required for his factory system of education for the masses of youth. This is the perfect vehicle for creating the docile and obedient work force with the requisite skills of literacy and numeracy and with just the right amount of individual initiative and responsibility - all ideal for factory life within the population. Capital assets were buildings and equipment and labour, the workforce, was the single greatest expense.

In 1943, as World War Two raged, western intellectuals were investigating and planning, for when the war ended, a new world out of the recognised failures of both state craft and competing imperial economies of the previous 50 years. At Dumbarton Oaks, Virginia, the United Nations Organisation was being hammered out and at Bretton Woods leading economists were reshaping the economic world system. It appears that very quickly after the war a stale mate in the UN between the communist East and the capitalist West first hardened views and then paralysed it. De-colonisation was begun in earnest and these developing, "Third World", countries supplied inexpensive raw materials and cash crops to the developed world in return for oppressive IMF and the IBRD, weapons and obedience. By 1946 and the creation, through the Bretton Woods Agreement, of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development (the IBRD, soon to become the World Bank) and the Gold Standard of \$35 (US) an ounce, the world economy was recreated and restructured with enormous US backing and was based largely on the Keynesian economic philosophy of

government involvement in the capitalist system through social programs to assist the members of society. Education in the developed world became more individualistic yet socially caring and advanced learning was stressed in an ever more complicated work environment. The educational framework was the same as the previous era (1850-1946), but was seen more as a screening process and the best and the brightest were actively sought out and given even higher levels of education in the competition for knowledge and power in the Cold War. Universities, particularly in the sixties, paid for by both public and private funds popped up everywhere to meet the demand. Ironically this large group of highly educated students, taught largely in the liberal arts, apparently led to the anti-establishment movement of the sixties when the educated fought against the very system that seemingly arbitrarily and for its own purposes educated them. In spite of the social changes, from the 1950's through the 1960's, capital assets continued to be buildings and equipment and the labour force remained the single greatest expense.

In 1970 the Gold Standard collapsed, it had been ineffectively propped up and by 1971 the United States under President Nixon opted out of the Bretton Woods system (Rothbard web article). Countries' economies flew by the seat of their pants from one crisis to another, stagflation to the OPEC oil embargo, and technology seemed to be the next wave of economic growth. Robotic systems, computers and new methods of production gave both a sense of hope for the new world as well as a sense of impending doom. Alvin Toffler's book and then television documentary, "Future Shock" (1970), led the way in philosophising new ways of thinking, our adaptability for and living within a technological age. The Canadian television program "Here Comes The Seventies" (1970) was broadcast to show the public the possibilities of the future and I had a class in school in 1973 that dealt with how to appropriately and positively deal with all the leisure time I would enjoy because computers would cut our work week in half. It was all frightful, hopeful and heady stuff.

Up and coming nations, rebuilt after the war, such as Germany and Japan, were economically and socially geared up, industrially tooled up and effectively positioned for this next wave. The Americans were happy with all this and accepted the enormous costs of

defending and propping up the West as long as these countries remained allies in the Cold War. Education became more open ended as curriculum became more driven by the teacher and the student and it was over balanced towards choice and interest of the teacher and students than prescribed by government. Government assessments, departmental exams which I didn't have to write in 1974, became a thing of the past as the liberal educational philosophy of the day took hold. Personalised learning occurred in as much as schools were free to experiment (and that was precisely what they did) with other forms of learning based on many up to date theories on learning. Technology was in its infancy and made a tentative appearance in schools but hit the business community like a wild fire. Alvin Toffler's sequel to "Future Shock" was "The Third Wave" (1980) and described the information age that was fast becoming a byword in any conversation. Hopes were high for the great advancements in technology and education would be electronically changed forever. Of greater importance than systematic test scores were the aptitudes that each individual student displayed and how they could be concentrated on while still being educated in all the other facets, such as socialisation and citizenship, deemed important by the government. The inherent flaws of this form of education within a large system became apparent when no two classes of students learned the same thing, some teachers were more rigorous than others and universities had trouble dealing with entrance requirements and their own accountability issues. Still, capital assets remained as buildings and equipment. The workforce, was still the single greatest expense, but new ideas began to emerge regarding the value of the knowledge within the workforce.

By the early 1980's, in response to the gradual collapse of the philosophy of Keynesian liberal and socially conscious government interference in the economy, the idea of accountability in all things led to the experimentation of privatisation and deregulation of government services by the economically neo-liberal governments of David Lange of New Zealand, Mulroney of Canada, Thatcher in Britain and Reagan of the United States leading the way. It was propagandized to the public with the credo that *'it is not the business of government to be in business'* and if all went well tax cuts could be made to the relief of all taxpayers after they had

been effectively convinced that they were indeed heavily burdened with taxes and that the social programs they supported were too expensive and ineffective. It appears the neo-liberal TINA (UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's "there is not alternative") economic policies and methods (accountability, corporate conservatism and fiscal cutbacks) finally took firm hold after the collapse of the NYSE in October of 1987. Neo-liberal economics with conservative politics came to the fore as tax cuts, cuts to public funding of education and cuts to health care spending were beginning to be felt. It is interesting that at this time a version of the personalised learning debate, Advancement Based On Competency (Helledie et al. 1987), was a large part of the local Calgary Board of Education's initiatives in the 1980's and early '90's at three area high schools. I was there as a teacher when the program was implemented at Ernest Manning High School and when it was officially abandoned in the mid nineties due to cutbacks and accountability issues.

During the late 1990's there was some room for optimism as there was unparalleled economic growth. The Soviet communists and their Warsaw pact allies were gone and the world gave a collective sigh of relief that a Third World War had been averted and that the West had 'won'. In some eyes that meant that Capitalism had beaten Socialism and that further meant that the world was open for business. Knowledge, Skills and Attributes (KSA's) as developed by government and corporate entities, such as the Conference Board of Canada Employability Skills, to determine job categories and what was needed to fill them were also seen as the best outcomes for students and the language of business crept into the offices, hallways and classrooms of our schools.

As corporations became multinational in size and transnational in scope their power became global, some rivaling those of developed nations (CorpWatch)(Barber 2001)(Dobbin1998). Corporate think tanks, posing as non-partisan such as the World Economic Forum, now take the center stage as global players above the purview of all but a few nation states and their laws. Globalization by 1995 is largely responsible for unparalleled growth in accumulated wealth in an ever concentrated privileged few. Mergers and acquisitions become the path to "winning" market share against a rival rather than producing a better product.

Branding has become crucial as each business jealously guards its logo, market share and knowledge capital (Achbar et al. 2003). Capital assets are now the brand and knowledge capital. Buildings, and the labour in them, and equipment are the new great expenses. Outsourcing is the solution to those costs.

The gap between the rich and the poor, both within a region and globally, becomes more pronounced with increased efforts of privatisation, deregulation, reduced public spending, freer markets, freer trade and ever greater accumulation and concentration of wealth leading to ever greater globalisation. Wallerstein's description through his world-systems analysis of the capitalist world-system seems quite accurate: where the core is technologically highly developed and manufactures complex products with well paid highly specialised labour and the periphery supplies the raw materials with cheap unskilled labour. The semi-periphery exists as a link that does core-like activities to the periphery and behaves like the periphery to the core (Wallerstein, 2005). World-systems theory seems to also imply that within capitalist world-systems a seemingly self-limiting property that of overly accumulating a finite amount of wealth. Complexity Theory describes the 'edge of chaos' of a system where if the system becomes too conservative, that is there is not enough change, the system will collapse into chaos. If the system becomes too liberal, that is there is too much change the system will also collapse into chaos (Coveney et al. 1995). If this is true, then it seems reasonable to assume large global systems must certainly fall within the constructs of this theory. The 'edge of chaos' seems to be a rather thin one and what chaos will befall us when either ultraconservatism and its rigidity towards change, perhaps as a global fascist dictatorship of the 'haves', or ultra-liberalism of the have 'nots' with its need for great change rebels against the machine?

To what extent is capitalist world-system and modern globalisation having an effect on this recent emergence of personalized learning? Is it a vehicle for the use of personalised learning plans, portfolios, and career planning in order for the student of today to understand and demonstrate their marketability and compete in the work place? It would seem that today's social value of education is its ability to participate in the economy. Some are hoping that this

new effort at personalised learning (as more and more of us become the have not's in an ever more divided world) will create a better individual - a socially conscious, morally responsible person within a "Just Society".

Is personalised learning for citizenship, in 2005, a reaction to the ills of the past decade of economic neoliberalism and social conservatism, by that I mean have we come to a point in the capitalist world-system where conservative methods of education are leaving us. That those in highly capitalised core sections of the system, with students unable to be fully productive in our economic system because of old industrial methods of instruction and so are making it less productive, less profitable, than it could be? Are we too close to the conservative 'edge of chaos'? In the next 50 years China and India should most certainly supersede the Americans and the Europeans who have been the makers of the world as we know it today. South and Central America could possibly be a powerhouse in the future as well. Are the protectionist neo-mercantilist actions (O'Brien et al 2002) of some economies, for example that of the United States levying high tariffs on foreign imports of goods such as Canadian softwood lumber, staving off the inevitable? Perhaps what they saw as their future is turning into someone else's future as they are less and less able to compete in a truly free global trade economy and hold more vigorously their place in the world through aggressive and often militaristic policies developed by the American Enterprise Institute and the Project for the New American Century?

Values of all the stake holders: the people, the learners, the teachers, the politicians, the business people and the capitalists and the processes we use to determine the hierarchy of importance of these values and people are all open to question. Is personalised learning different in each of Wallerstein's three areas of economics; core, semi-peripheral and peripheral? Could conservative and liberal versions of personalised learning suit specific areas within the capitalist world-system today? The outcomes of the "discussion" between them will determine our collective futures. What are the basic values that we all want? Is our old form of factory style education finally, at long last, no longer able to be bent for applying education to a new world? The needs of youth, particularly learning civil and social justice, is growing in core economic

areas as the tighter levels of control of accumulated wealth leave more and more young people marginalized and peripheral. Will there be a time when a single form of personalised learning will be the norm, if it is not now?

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