STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING PERSONALIZED LEARNING AND EDUCATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Lia Codrina Conțiu, Assist. Prof., „Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu Mureș

Abstract: Personalized learning is the tailoring of pedagogy, curriculum and learning environments by learners or for learners in order to meet their different learning needs and aspirations. Personalization does take into account the pace at which the learner is progressing, but also aims to valorise the entire potential of the learner, the biography, the abilities, the sensibilities and competencies (including emotional ones) that characterizes each person, in order to reach a form of cognitive excellence, by developing all aptitudes, capabilities and talents. ICT and Communications technology can be a powerful tool for personalized learning as it allows learners access to research and information, and provides a mechanism for communication, debate, and recording learning achievements. However, personalized learning is not exclusive to digital technologies or environments.

In the present study we are carrying out a survey on students' perceptions regarding personalized learning and educational communication, trying to find out if this type of learning can fit into the formal educational system.

Keywords: personalized learning, educational communication, learning needs, abilities, ICT

1. Introduction

Personalized learning is the tailoring of pedagogy, curriculum and learning environments by learners or for learners in order to meet their different learning needs and aspirations. Personalization does take into account the pace at which the learner is progressing, but also aims to valorise the entire potential of the learner, the biography, the abilities, the sensibilities and competencies (including emotional ones) that characterizes each person, in order to reach a form of cognitive excellence, by developing all aptitudes, capabilities and talents.

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)
CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication
Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2016
ISBN: 978-606-8624-17-4
Section: Psychology and Education Sciences

224

In the present study we are carrying out a survey on students' perceptions regarding personalized learning and educational communication, trying to find out if this type of learning can fit into the formal educational system. This interest was aroused by the participation in a Working Group Meeting - I-Learner – Integrating the Cloud: personalised learning, within *School on the Cloud – Connecting Education to the Cloud for Digital Citizenship (SoC)* LLP project, in November 2014. SoC network explores new dynamic ways in education that align with the way we think, share, learn and collaborate, across various sectors, by exploiting the opportunities arising from the Cloud.

K. C. Koutsopoulos and Y. C. Kotsanis, in *School on Cloud: Towards a paradigm shift* (2014) noticed that educational environment changed and now „we find ourselves in the period of the cloud student-cantered (or personalized) teaching and learning paradigm". The position suggested by the authors is that there is a need to develop „an integrated approach which is simultaneously pedagogical (i.e. new role of teachers), technical/technological (i.e. use of the internet), administrative (i.e. new role of school administrators), social (i.e. a different disposition of parents towards school), political (i.e. a different approach of government to school) and cultural (i.e. new role of students), in dialectic harmony and respecting all aspects of teaching and learning an integral part of which are pupils, teachers and school administrators".

Starting from this position, we took into account two aspects mostly, the new role of teachers and learners perceptions regarding the personalized experience offered by teachers, trying to elaborate a profile of this new „type" of teacher based on students' responses.

We consider that ICT and communications technology can be a powerful tool for personalized learning as it allows learners access to research and information, and provides a mechanism for communication, debate, and recording learning achievements. However, personalized learning is not exclusive to digital technologies or environments; that is why we believe that the role of teachers and the way they provide the learning experience should change in order to integrate this new type of learning process into the formal educational system.

2. Personalised learning – definitions and concepts

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)
CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication
Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2016
ISBN: 978-606-8624-17-4
Section: Psychology and Education Sciences

225

It is difficult to embrace personalised learning in only one definition, and it was defined by different authors with different accents during time.

Parkhurst and Dalton Plan (19th century): In line with the Dalton plan, each student can program its curriculum to meet their needs, interests and abilities; to promote both independence and reliability; to improve their social skills and sense of responsibility towards other students.

Washburne: Self-government and Winnetka Plan (the first years of 1900): the plan sought to expand educational emphasis on creative activities and emotional and social development, using a program of a type that later became known as "programmed instruction".

Claparède, in "L'école sur mesure" (1920), states that the student should be able to freely choose a number of activities to improve intellectual, social and moral growth and develop the personality fully.

Bloom and the Mastery learning ('50s-'60s) is a training method that assumes all students can learn if they are provided with the adequate learning conditions. Namely, Mastery Learning is a method by which students are not advanced to the next learning objective until they demonstrate proficiency with the current one.

Keller within the Personalized System of Instruction ('60s) gives instructions based on requirements that allow students to work independently on course modules. It is an individually paced mastery oriented teaching method. The Personalized System of instruction also fits slightly with social constructivism by requiring students to work in teams of peer support with a proctor answering questions on the studied contents.

In the theory of multiple intelligences developed by Gardner Howard Gardner it is stated that not only human beings have several different ways to learn and process information, but they are independent of each other, leading to multiple "intelligences" as opposed to a general intelligence factor among correlated abilities.

The first one that coined the term "personalization" in the context of educational science is Victor Garcìa Hoz, in 1970. His most important work in this context is "Personalized Education" published in 1981.

Kilpatrik and the Project Method (early 21st century) is centred on the student, is problem solving oriented, and teacher direction is minimized. The teacher acts more as a facilitator to

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)
CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication
Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2016
ISBN: 978-606-8624-17-4
Section: Psychology and Education Sciences

226

encourage self-decision and self-control of students, more than providing knowledge and information.

Historically, the term was used in a 2004 speech in UK by David Miliband, Minister of State for School Standards for the United Kingdom, who, in a chapter later published in an anthology on the topic, stated that: "personalized learning is the way in which our best schools tailor education to ensure that every pupil achieves the highest standard possible. Our drive is to make these practices universal."

David Miliband (2004) lists five components that need to be taken in account in order facilitate the introduction of personalised learning into the formal educational system: "First, a personalised offer in education depends on really knowing the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. So, the biggest driver for change is assessment for learning and the use of data and dialogue to diagnose every student's learning needs. Second, personalised learning demands that we develop the competence and confidence of each learner through teaching and learning strategies that build on individual needs. Third, curriculum choice engages and respects students. Fourth, personalised learning demands a radical approach to school organisation. It means the starting point for class organisation is always student progress, with opportunities for in-depth, intensive teaching and learning, combined with flexible deployment of support staff. Fifth, personalised learning means the community, local institutions and social services supporting schools to drive forward progress in the classroom."

According to the National Educational Technology Plan (2010) developed by the US Department of Education, personalized learning is defined as adjusting the pace (individualization), adjusting the approach (differentiation), and connecting to the learner's interests and experiences. Personalization is broader than just individualization or differentiation in that it affords the learner a degree of choice about what is learned, when it is learned and how it is learned. The rhetoric is often phrased in terms of learning 'anytime, anywhere or any place'. This may not indicate unlimited choice, since learners will still have targets to be met. However, it may provide learners the opportunity to learn in ways that suit their individual learning styles and multiple intelligences.

Dunn and Griggs (2000) note that personalized education is a way to capitalize on student strengths, and results in true learning. Waldeck (2006) reported that one possible dimension of

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)
CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication
Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2016
ISBN: 978-606-8624-17-4
Section: Psychology and Education Sciences

227

personalized education involves students and teachers engaging in social exchanges and reciprocal self-disclosure.

In 2010 a definition of personalisation was proposed based on an Andragogic concept of Education within the European Grundtvig Project named LEADLAB – Leading Elderly and Adult Development LAB.

The features of this definition are as follow:

• Involve all dimensions of student (cognitive, social, and emotional);

• Empowering awareness of the learning process;

• Developing self-regulated learning;

• Co-design of learning process and pathway;

• Develop self-assessment process;

• learning challenge instead of learning objectives;

• Learning pathway instead of instructional curriculum or training program;

• Achievable results are not predictable a priori.

3. Method

The primary objective of this study was to derive empirically a profile of the nature of students' personalized educational experiences analysing three factors: *Teacher Accessibility*, *Course-related Practices* and *Teacher Interpersonal Competence*.

We developed a questionnaire with 25 items using 5 point Likert-scale and 5 identification items based on J.H. Waldeck's work (2007). Students completed the questionnaire that began by asking them to think of 'one particular teacher who has helped to create a personalized educational experience' for them. Students were then introduced to an extract from an article on personalized education reviewed in Waldeck (2006).

"For example, this teacher might have devised a unique assignment for you or your class based on your interests, invited you to participate in his/her research, been especially approachable outside of the classroom, or demonstrated special concern for your personal goals and plans, and so on. There is no definition of 'personalized education', please think of experiences that you consider to be personalized Waldeck (2007)."

The questionnaire was applied to students from "Petru Maior" University, Targu-Mures, Romania and 53 of the respondents provided usable responses.

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)
CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication
Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2016
ISBN: 978-606-8624-17-4
Section: Psychology and Education Sciences

228

The mean age of the sample was 24.13 years (range 18-45). All the participants either completed a university or they are still attending it. 64.15% of the respondents were female and 50.94% of the questioned people were employed either in a public institution or in a private enterprise, the rest of them being only students without any income and mostly all of them are single, only 11.23% are married.

4. Results

The first 9 items of the questionnaire were used to asses *Teacher Accessibility* (see Figure 1).
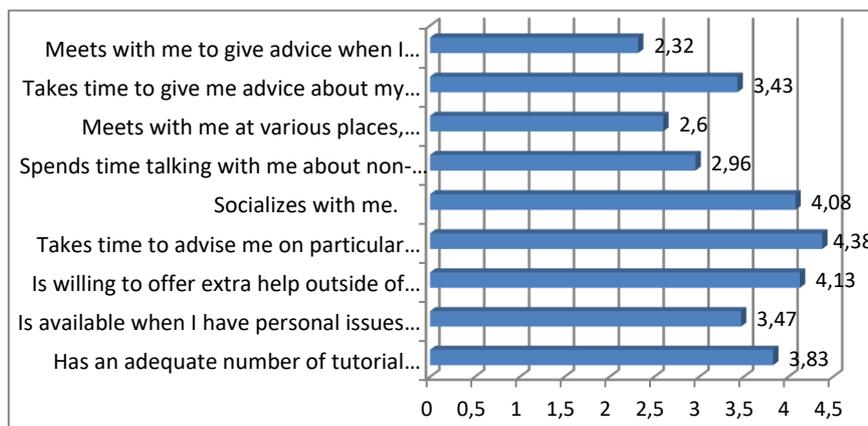

Figure 1 Teacher Accessibility

The students considered that the teacher who can give them a "personalised experience" *Takes time to advise them on particular courses* (4.38), *Is willing to offer extra help outside of class* (4.13), *Socializes with them* (4.08) and *Has an adequate number of tutorial hours to provide extra help for students* (3.83). Based on the results we can notice that "personalised" means consultation, advice and socialising between teacher and student.

The second set of 9 items was designed to evaluate *Course-related Practices* (see Figure 2).
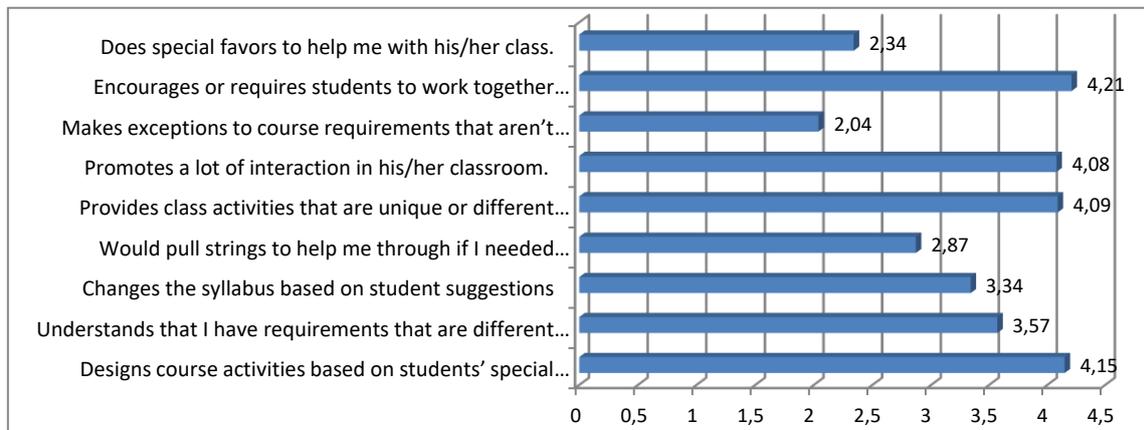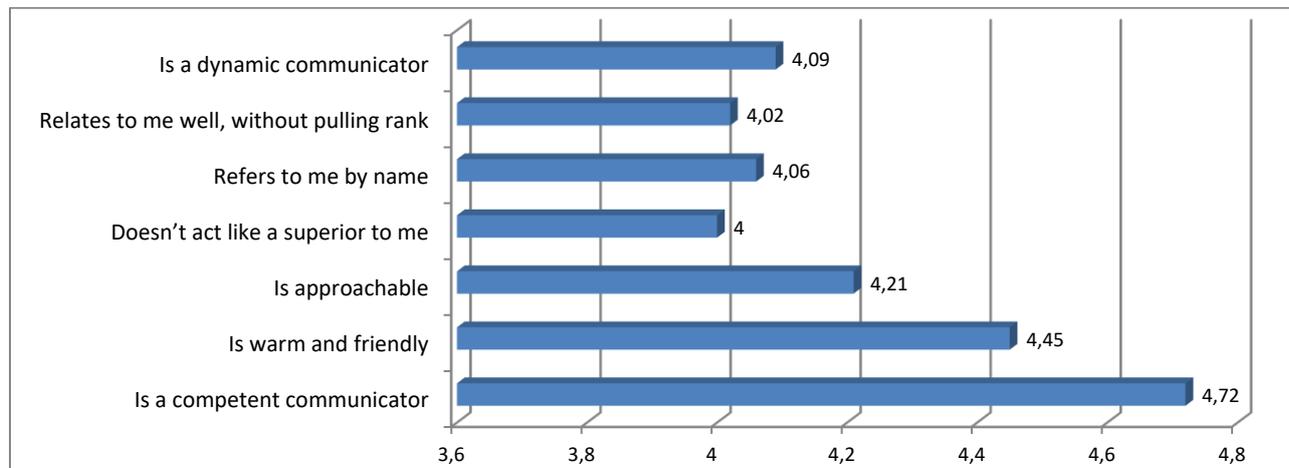
Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)
CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication
Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2016
ISBN: 978-606-8624-17-4
Section: Psychology and Education Sciences

229

Figure 2 Course-related Practices

The respondents stated that the practices used by the teacher, considered to be "personalised", are as follow: *Encourages or requires students to work together during the course* (4.21), *Designs course activities based on students' special interests* (4.15), *Provides class activities that are unique or different from my other professors* (4.09), *Promotes a lot of interaction in his/her classroom* (4.08). So, it is clear that teamwork, a syllabus designed based on students' interests, activities that are interesting and different as well as interaction during classes are the practices that make the difference.

The third set of 7 items refers to *Teacher Interpersonal Competence* (see Figure 3).

The students considered that the most needed characteristics of a teacher is to be *a competent communicator* (4.72), to be *warm and friendly* (4.45), as well as *approachable* (4.21). They do not care much about rank or power distance. However, all the answers recorded scores over 4, meaning that all the competences are important for them to a greater or lesser extent.

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)
CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication
Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2016
ISBN: 978-606-8624-17-4
Section: Psychology and Education Sciences

230

Horizontal bar chart with the following values:
- Is a dynamic communicator: 4,09
- Relates to me well, without pulling rank: 4,02
- Refers to me by name: 4,06
- Doesn't act like a superior to me: 4
- Is approachable: 4,21
- Is warm and friendly: 4,45
- Is a competent communicator: 4,72

X-axis: 3,6 | 3,8 | 4 | 4,2 | 4,4 | 4,6 | 4,8

Conclusions

The study was intended to analyse students' preferences regarding personalized learning and educational communication based on three dimensions: Teacher Accessibility, Course-related Practices and Teacher Interpersonal Competence.

The results showed that "personalised" means consultation, advice and socialising between teacher and student. Teamwork, a syllabus designed based on students' interests, activities that are interesting and different as well as interaction during classes are the practices that make the difference. Students perceived teachers who practice behaviours like warmth, empathy and immediacy as being better and providing "personalised" learning experiences.

Teachers who wish to provide personalised learning experiences for students should take into account students' preferences and expectations and should be willing to help them develop the best learning behaviours and expectations if they are not in accordance with what the teacher wants to do within the teaching-learning process.

The study has some limitations as the sample is a reduced one and it is composed only of students either from bachelor degree or master. As the research is based only on quantitative data, a plus could be the introduction of qualitative data, using open questions for the respondents.

This study represents only the beginning of further research on personalised learning, analysing other aspects such as mentoring, learning styles, extra-class communication, usage of ITC tools, the new educational opportunities connected to cloud etc.

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)
CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication
Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2016
ISBN: 978-606-8624-17-4
Section: Psychology and Education Sciences

231

The practical aspect of this study is that it illustrates that students want the teachers to be approachable, friendly, sociable, advising them in different matters, taking into account their interests, promoting interaction during classes and working with peers, designing interesting activities and a syllabus that can stimulate them in many way

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Claparède E. (1920). L'école sur mesure, Genève, Payot,

2. Dunn, R., & Griggs, S. A. (Eds.). (2000). Practical approaches to using learning styles in higher education, Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

3. http://etcjournal.com/2010/11/10/glimpse-transforming-american-education-learning-powered-by-technology/

4. Koutsopoulos, K. C. and Kotsanis, Y. C. (2014). School on Cloud: Towards a paradigm shift, Themes in Science & Technology Education, 7(1), 47-62,

5. LEADLAB – Leading Elderly and Adult Development LAB, http://fdep.ch/Documents/Projets/LEADLAB%20Presentation.pdf

6. Miliband, David (2006). *Chapter 1 Choice and Voice in Personalised Learning*, Personalising Education, OECD, p. 24, retrieved on 15th March 2015, http://www.oecd.org/site/schoolingfortomorrowknowledgebase/themes/demand/41175554.pdf

7. Waldeck, J. H. (2006). Raising the question #3: What does ''personalized education'' mean for faculty, and how should it serve our students? *Communication Education*, 55, 345-352.

8. Waldeck, J. H. (2007). Answering the Question: Student Perceptions of Personalized Education and the Construct's Relationship to Learning Outcomes, Communication Education, 56 (4), 409-432