

This guide covers learner empowerment in the context of personalised learning. Personalised learning involves giving individual learners an experience that meets their personal, social and educational needs and which, ultimately, helps them to achieve their ambitions.

The main features of personalised learning include:

- promoting high expectations on the part of the learner and his or her learning provider
- encouraging learner participation at every level of the organisation
- empowering individuals to reach their full potential and achieve their ambitions.

Personalised learning is a shared process involving teachers and individual learners. However, it aims to transfer responsibility for learning from teachers to learners. This has implications for session planning and delivery. Personalised learning recognises that learners begin their learning experience from different starting points and that they possess unique talents, aptitudes and skills that have not been previously recognised or used to best effect to overcome barriers to learning. It acknowledges that learners need to learn how to learn and to access different opportunities and support to succeed in adult life.

Personalised learning can be translated as ‘tailored’ learning. Teachers who practise it work in conjunction with individual learners to assess the learner’s previous achievements and experiences (personal, social and educational), needs, interests and aspirations. They then map out what the learner needs to do and achieve to get where he or she wants to be. The recommended steps for the learner to take are identified and targets set and agreed so that he or she has the best chance of achieving his or her future ambitions. Review dates are recorded and methods of support planned for in a document that is often called an individual learning plan (ILP). This ILP is, in effect, a route map for lifelong learning.

Learner empowerment: making it happen

Empowered learners are learners who are involved, informed and heard.

Involved

Consider involving learners in:

- compiling schemes of work
- planning and delivering sessions
- planning and delivering group tutorials
- mentoring their peers
- planning and developing a programme of enrichment activities.

Learners’ participation in the above activities supports the concept of personalised learning. It also helps to foster within learners a greater awareness of their actions and consequences, contributions and rewards.

Informed

Learners can become empowered if they are informed about: the assessment criteria for the qualifications being studied; methods of support and where it can be obtained; progress made to date; steps that need to be taken to achieve long-term goals; progression opportunities and the day-to-day operations of their college. If learners are informed, they are in a better position to make choices that give them the best chance of success.

Heard

The Common Inspection Framework (Ofsted 2005) stresses the importance of obtaining and acting on learners' views. Tutorials and feedback have a role to play here. So do more formal methods of consultation such as advisory panels. For more information on the learner voice, please refer to another Quick Guide in this series: *Tutorials and peer mentoring*.

Using teaching and learning strategies to promote learner empowerment

Teachers need to recognise that individuals making up a class will learn in different ways. In any class there will be a wide variation in learners' listening skills, presentation skills and ability to cooperate. The amount and quality of work that learners are able to complete in class and as homework will also vary. So, a teacher must take care when planning sessions to ensure that all learners, despite these differences, learn and ultimately achieve. Planning to provide a range of support for weaker learners to ensure that they can access learning is an important priority for teachers, as is preparing appropriate extension activities to help able learners to reach their full potential.

Learning styles

Learning styles concern the way in which learners approach and experience learning and use information. They can meet learners' needs and also empower them to be more effective in achieving their learning outcomes.

Many questionnaires exist to determine an individual's learning style, which can be:

- visual – the learner prefers to read and take notes
- auditory – the learner enjoys discussion and needs to talk through new learning
- kinaesthetic – the learner remembers from experience and likes hands-on activities.

When teachers have identified the learning styles of the learners in their group, they can:

- plan into their sessions teaching and learning strategies that meet the needs of all learners
- design learning resources that incorporate all three learning styles
- work specific goals and targets into a learner's ILP.

Accelerated learning

The thinking behind accelerated learning is that people learn more effectively when both sides of the brain are engaged. Teachers can empower learners by encouraging them to participate in activities that use both sides of the brain.

Left side of the brain – believed to be associated with:

- language
- maths formulae
- detail
- logic
- analysis
- song script
- number
- sequences.

Right side of the brain – believed to be associated with:

- music and rhythm
- colour
- big picture
- creativity
- forms and patterns
- spatial awareness
- imagination and visualisation
- daydreaming.

E-learning

E-learning (learning that is enhanced with computers) can empower learners by giving them more responsibility for their learning. E-learning is commonly associated with distance learning, which can give learners a great deal of autonomy. However, in schools and colleges it is more likely to be used in conjunction with face-to-face teaching. In this context, e-learning is likely to include the use of:

- web-based teaching and learning materials
- CD-ROMs
- discussion boards
- e-mail
- blogs
- podcasts
- wikis
- video simulations.

E-learning gives learners greater independence and control over their own work, as the following examples illustrate.

- Computers enable learning resources to be personalised to meet individuals' learning styles.
- E-learning gives learners access to expertise and information when they need it.

- E-learning removes barriers to learning. For example, sound can be added to typed documents to meet the needs of learners with hearing impairments.
- Video simulations give learners authentic experience of the workplace if visits to employers are difficult to organise.

These traits serve to raise learners' motivation, confidence and self-esteem.

Another Quick Guide in this series (*Assessment for learning*) explains how feedback encourages learner participation and has been shown to improve learning attainment and achievement. It also stresses that feedback needs to be given in a timely fashion if it is to be effective. Learners, peers or teachers can use the following methods to feed back comments on pieces of work:

- electronic discussion boards
- e-mail
- instant messaging
- conferencing
- wikis.

Learning platforms

The term learning platform encompasses VLEs (virtual learning environments) and MLEs (managed learning environments). The basic requirement is a personal online space for the learner that provides password-protected access to stored work and learning resources. There is also a requirement for both teachers and learners to be able to track progress.

Learning platforms have a significant role to play in encouraging learners to direct and manage aspects of their learning. They also give learners access to a broader curriculum, more vocational options and a choice of study settings, including the college, home, workplace or community.

The technology can also be used to support those delivering learning. Teachers, training providers and employers are able to communicate and share resources, concerns and ideas through virtual communities.

This is particularly important in the context of specialised Diplomas, where it is recognised that the entitlement cannot be delivered by any one institution or provider in isolation.

Effective target-setting with individual learners

Colleges and schools committed to the concept of personalised learning encourage learners to set their own targets.

Learners who set their own short-term targets and long-term learning goals, working in conjunction with teachers and other professionals, gain the knowledge, skills and confidence to deal with the challenges of adult life and to make decisions about their career options. Long-term goals can give a vision for the future. Short-term targets can trigger short bursts of learning activity. It is usual for the short-term targets to lead to the achievement of the long-term goals.

Although the process of setting their own targets can be potentially inspiring and stimulating for learners, they can become demotivated if the targets set are impossible to achieve in the timescale given.

As a result, targets need to be SMART:

- specific: say exactly what learners need to do
- measurable: so that learners can prove they have reached them
- achievable: so that learners have the potential to achieve them within a reasonable timescale
- realistic: about action that can be taken
- time-bound: have deadlines.

The action plan section of the ILP specifies what learners need to do to achieve their SMART targets and details what and who will help them. Target-setting that suggests minimum target grades for learners to aim for is widely used in the sector.

The target-setting process

Before a one-to-one tutorial takes place, the tutor should provide the learner with the pro forma to complete as a means of self-assessing his or her performance. Having talked through the pro forma and explained its purpose, the tutor's role is to then support the learner in completing it.

When finalised, the pro forma should be attached to the learner's ILP so that it can be referred to in one-to-one discussions during course delivery.

Target-setting is a skill that is developed with practice. Over time, learners will gain confidence in their ability to identify:

- where they are now
- where they want to be
- what may impede that learning.

Reviewing progress against targets

Any reviews of progress must be empowering and contribute to the aspect of personalised learning that aims to transfer responsibility for learning from the teacher to the young person. A minimum of six review meetings a year is recommended.

ILPs form the basis of reviews with learners. Formative assessment also feeds into the review process. Whereas summative assessment focuses on what a learner has learnt at the end of a programme, formative assessment encourages reflection and evaluation.

Open-ended questions put to learners by a tutor prompt the learners to:

- talk about how their learning is going
- celebrate their individual successes
- focus on how successes can be built on.

Further information

Contact the Vocational Learning Support Programme for information on all aspects of vocational and work-related learning for 14–19-year-old learners.

Vocational Learning Support Programme

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