Interactive Classroom Working Group: Personalising Learning

Spotlight on Objective-based evaluation

By Philippe Favre, Elementary school teacher, Planzette (Sierre, Valais, Switzerland)

Background

Planzette elementary school is situated on a hill not far from downtown Sierre, in the canton of Valais, in the middle of the Swiss Alps. In 1991 my colleague M. Patrick Briguet and myself asked to be transferred to this small school in order to start a three part project called decompartmentalization.

The three components of the project are as follows:

1. Experimenting new forms of assessment
2. Personalising learning ("differenciated instruction" in French, not sure if the meaning is exactly the same)
3. Integration of ICT

Benefits of personalising learning for students and schools/teachers

Every survey and evaluation (internal and external) that has been carried out in our school since 1997 has confirmed that:

- *The number of students that have to repeat a year reduced strongly.*
- *Students who want to succeed know, thanks to the assessment system (called Evalog), what they need to practice and work over.*
- *Using the School's internet platform and the ICT resources available in the classroom, students can find exercises matching their needs*
- *Instead of piloting their class through trial and error (blind navigation), teachers navigate with instruments.*
- *Teachers feel they can accompany and mentor their students to the best and highest level they can achieve.*

Showcasing: Objective-based evaluation

In the nineties we gave our students many ways to personalize learning but this freedom had some unintended consequences that drove us to give up some of the personalization. Very advanced students

could skip a year. Students who only failed in a main subject could end up for instance in the 5th grade in math but in the 6th grade for all the other subjects. Students could be promoted to the next grade during the year. It depended on their results.

- *To share practices with colleagues beyond the Swiss Alps horizon.*

The Evalog objective-based evaluation tool supplies assessment tables that tell each pupil which school objective he/she has reached or not.

With this tool, the students can make informed and autonomous choices during or after the class in order to reach the goals they think they are able to achieve. To help them find resources which match their need, there is an online table with links to exercises, available educational software and other resources.

How is theme demonstrated (in and out of school), and in which subjects/classes?

During the lessons, there aren't that many obvious differences with a standard classroom, except the 12 computers and an IWB with ActiveExpression devices.

In many situations during a lesson, the teachers are watching and assessing their students in terms of: "This one is able to do that". ActiveExpression clickers are obviously helpful to do this.

Twice a month, we have so called "regulation workshops" during which every student can choose an objective he studies or works on, after which he asks for a test. If he succeeds, his results increase. The mark is then given in a percentage.

At home, students and parents can have a look at their results via the school website.

Most popular technology used in support of theme

- Evalog (school assessment system) for teacher - to know precisely who knows what.
- ZwookEdu (the CMS we use) - to share information, online exercises, etc.
- Promethean interactive whiteboard & ActiveExpression
- Common software packages: Photoline, LibreOffice, etc. - students create, invent, etc.

What happens in a typical 1:1 teaching situation or class when personalising learning?

You could see pupils asking for an exercise or a test. Without personalisation, the opposite is true: pupils don't ask for work, they'd rather avoid exams and exercises. But the ones who want to improve their skills do it because it increases their results too.

In a typical classroom, we train future employees and future consumers. We, on the other hand, try to train future bosses and future creators too.

Some students are very motivated. They realize that it's never too late to succeed. They can get better even they have failed at the first test. It all depends on them. They realize that they have the power to change things. They learn to become resilient and to not give up after the first failure. For other students, not much changes. If they don't like school, dislike reading, learning and working, then personalizing learning will not necessarily change their behaviour.

Most parents appreciate the school's goal to bring every student to his best possible level rather than selecting who's good and who's not. Over the last few years we have noticed that the way parents consider school (are they partners or consumers?) has an effect on the way their children behave at school.

Impact

There are many teaching approaches. In our opinion, a good teaching approach is the one that will work here and now with the students you have.

It certainly would be a mistake to switch to exclusive individual approaches. It sounds like a truism but one of the best things a teacher can do is teach. Teacher-led instruction remains an efficient way to teach 20 students something.

Besides, to make children able to work together remains one of education's goals. So Personalising learning is one of the two axes. A well balanced approach proceeds along two complementary tracks: personalization and teacher-led instruction.

How has personalising learning contributed to innovation and change?

Collaborative learning and digital skills were part of the project. However, the interesting question is what the changes in the administration process are. The answer is "almost nothing". In fact, we went through 3 phases:

- 1992-1998: School officials were interesting, enthusiastic and confident: they agreed with our project, gave the authorizations, organized some visits of the school in order to demonstrate how innovative could be the public school in our canton. And finally, they officialised the experiment and the assessment system. They paid for the development and the porting to windows, published that on the official school magazine giving the permission to other schools to adopt our assessment system.
- 1999-2000 : Another canton launched a large educational reform that abolished the use of marks in assessment. That political choice had been strongly fought. Therefore, they had to step back, and the Minister of education has not been re-elected after that
- 2001 to now: After this moment, the debate on school assessment seemed to be frozen in our canton. The use of marks (from 1 to 6 points) seemed became untouchable even this system had been invent one century ago by the Jesuits when the aim was only to select students and event the fact school curricula changed a lot.

About the author:

- **Expert**: Philippe Favre, Elementary school teacher
- **The Evalog software**: http://www.evalog.ch/zwook/telechargement
- **School website**: http://web.ecoles.sierre.ch/planz56
- A class project :

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Philippe Favre