



JUST A

THERE'S NO BAD TIME TO EXPLORE INNOVATIVE NEW TEACHING METHODS, SAYS EILEEN FIELD...

TEACHER?

Q

We are expecting Ofsted in April next year. I want to incorporate more personalised and collaborative learning across my English department... but should I play it safe?

**A** At a recent network learning conference the speaker shared a great video clip about fleas (stay with me...) An omnipotent, white-coated scientist is seen adding some lively, bouncy fleas to a jam jar, which is then tightly sealed. We are told that after three days, when the lid is removed, the fleas continue to jump, but not out of the jar. The authoritative voiceover tells us that the fleas will never jump higher than the lid and that their behaviour is now set for the rest of their lives. Should they reproduce, even their offspring will automatically follow their example. Like other colleagues, I smiled, chuckled and then the message percolated through. How tight is that lid in my classroom? Yes, I too hear the 'Accountability Furies' singing in my ears, but Ofsted's own definition of outstanding calls out for 'lifting the lid' too: *Teachers use well-judged and often inspirational teaching strategies, including setting appropriate homework that, together with sharply focused and timely support and intervention, match individual needs accurately. Consequently, pupils learn exceptionally well across the curriculum.*

As teachers, we should challenge our traditional, prescriptive classrooms and try out new tools and techniques to meet our students' needs – tools and techniques that might make learning accessible, meaningful, and fun. I know we are content driven at secondary level, and that's got to be battled through, but it is such a disservice to our students if that is all we do. So if you are interested in exploring personalisation and collaborative learning... go for it!

Not too long ago, whilst on holiday, my two great-nieces, aged seven and four, disappeared for a

couple of hours with their grandad. They returned home in a heated debate over some mysterious eggs that they had discovered at the edge of a pond. Despite the fact that we were in Norfolk, the youngest insisted that the eggs were from a crocodile. Her hope was to get hold of a few hatchlings, raise them to maturity, and train them to keep the local cats out of grandad's garden. For a few days, the pair sought to uncover everything they could about various animals in the area. They photographed the eggs, showed the photos to everyone they knew, debated, and – in their own words – set about looking for an 'egg-spert' to settle it once and for all. The 'egg incident' reminds me of the need to do something similar in my secondary classroom – to transform traditional learning practices into more customised learning experiences where students are encouraged to employ choice and self-regulation in their own learning.

By definition, personalised learning seeks to align classroom content, teaching, and other aspects of learning towards individual students, their unique interests, and past learning experiences. As of late, a multitude of research findings have underscored the importance of learning activities that encourage student control over the learning process. But the real potential of a personalised approach lies in teachers' exploration of ways to customise curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment in ways that differ from person to person, and student to student. For me it's Blended Learning – be that flipped, flex, virtual or a combination of all.

It is no small coincidence that video games are successful largely due to their ability to extend control and choice to players through customisation of play. In the act of customising their own learning, students learn a good deal about their own thinking, reflection and ways of solving problems.

For example, as part of my continuing

trailing of Blended Learning, I recently came across a free teaching tool called Actively Learn ([activelylearn.com](http://activelylearn.com)), which makes it simple for teachers to customise text-based assignments in ways that make texts more 'active'. The tool enhances reading passages with 'layers,' or combinations of embedded, questions, images, notes, and even multimedia clips to help provide students with contextual information. The collaborative features allow students to view and comment on the responses of others after answering their own questions. On the teacher side of things, there are pre-loaded texts within the system or you can load your own. Student responses can be reviewed manually or the programme can self-mark.

Regardless of which approach we take in our attempts to personalise student learning, there exists a great need for us all to spend some time and energy learning through the eyes of the students and designing pedagogy that capitalises on their interests and readiness to learn. The development and implementation of customised learning and personalised pedagogy takes time, but will be well worth it. While we cannot provide a pond and mysterious eggs for every youngster, we can work more conscientiously to personalise learning.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Eileen Field is director of achievement, online and virtual learning, at Edison Learning ([edisonlearning.net](http://edisonlearning.net)). She has held a number of senior leadership roles in secondary schools and in 2004 was invited to design a nationwide internet school to serve out-of-school-learners, eventually becoming the head teacher of the only virtual secondary school in the UK. You can contact her directly with any queries at [eileen.field@edisonlearning.com](mailto:eileen.field@edisonlearning.com)

