My-E: an online visual environment to support very young students to explore and express their own personal learning experiences

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My-E aims to help young learners develop meaningful conversations that are supported in both the home and school. By helping children to have 'conversations that matter', it is hoped that My-E will help children to make their home and school cultures more visible to both teachers and parents/guardians, thereby providing the basis for a more personalised learning journey.

Figure 1: The My-e touch screen table-top computer

Outline
My-E (My Education) is a prototype online visual environment that can support very young students to explore and express their own personal learning experiences, interests and aims. The software application allows young children (aged 5 and 6) to construct stories about their learning experiences and preferences through multi-layered representations (such as shapes, icons and sounds), which teachers, adults and parents/carers help them to develop. The aim of this is to encourage children, parents/ carers and teachers/adults to be more involved in rich conversations about learning that can help foster greater links between homes and schools and support a more personalised educational approach.

Background
This project is situated within current debates around personalisation, learner voice and home-school links. Personalisation requires different approaches to build upon the needs and interests of the learner in conversation and dialogue with others, yet this presents many practical and abstract problems. For example: the ability of teachers to take account of each individual's needs and interests within the limited number of hours in a school day; teachers' ability and opportunity to react to these needs; and how teachers can manage the conflict between developing a curriculum based more around learners' interests with the statutory demands of the National Curriculum. Other challenges include the changing relationships between adults and teachers, the role of learner voice in shaping learning journeys, and the role of schools in relation to the wider community. Providing opportunities for teachers and schools to understand and take account of young people's cultures and experiences outside school is vital in developing a more personalised approach, yet strategies and tools for doing this are limited. In this way, My-E is aligned with, and can contribute to discussion regarding:

- Personalisation
- Every Child Matters

- extended schools
- parental involvement (including home-school agreements and contracts, especially in disadvantaged areas and in multi-ethnic schools)

Aims

The central aim of this project was to strengthen the 'personal learning networks' of young people – creating and strengthening the links between parents, teachers and others significant to the child's learning - and to encourage dialogue within these networks that can form the basis of more personalised learning pathways. As these networks strengthen, teachers are able to understand the learners' out-of-school interests and strengths, and parents are able to be more involved in formal learning activities and conversations.

Team

Futurelab
theWorkshop

Technology

Flash web application Touch-screen tabletop computer Tablet PC The idea of a personal learning network or 'loop' in the My-E project reflects the Every Child Matters agenda of joined up social and educational services and inclusion of families in learning. It also reflects more radical approaches derived from critical pedagogy – in which knowledge in communities is valued and new knowledge produced through home-school dialogue. Shared language, common understanding, respect for difference, time for mentoring, linking and public activities, and documenting learning at home and school are key. The My-E software has been designed

Figure 2: The interface for creating stories

to create a prototype digital tool and learning context to investigate how practitioners and parents can promote personal learning networks, to create, develop and sustain rich learning conversations with the following intended benefits:

Learners:
- being involved in forming the basis for a personalised learning pathway
- developing multi-literacy skills
- developing communication skills
- holding dialogues about learning
- increasing vocabulary (large and varied)
- developing metacognitive skills – reflecting on learning experiences and preferences.

Teachers:
- learning about and valuing diverse
- family backgrounds and personal needs of children
- appreciating multi-literacies – valuing different kinds of literacy in schools
- developing skills required to create and sustain home-school links

- innovating in their lesson activities, using new technologies and 1:1 mentoring approaches.

Parents/carers:
- learning about and gaining better insight into their child's development and their own contribution.

Early feedback

Early research and user-testing trials have shown that My-E is well received by children, teachers and parents. The children in the trial all wanted to continue to use My-E and teachers were very excited that the pupils were able to create stories in different
ways, according to their abilities and preferences:

- visually (creating people, adding feeling icons, taking and inputting photographs)
- verbally (recording sounds)
- with text (typing text and sentences).

Figure 3: Teacher and students using the My-e table

The teachers were also very pleased   to see the pupils developing their literacy and suggested a number of follow-up activities to reinforce this learning. The research has indicated that using My-E can provide a rich opportunity for interactions between children and their home and school learning contexts.

Next steps / future plans:

Further research trials are planned to understand in more depth the benefits of My-E approaches.

Partners

The idea for My-E was brought to Futurelab by theWorkshop, through the Teachers and Innovations Call for Ideas programme.