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Student Voice: Time for a conversation

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Short bio:

Dr Valerie Hall joined the University of Wolverhampton in September 2015 as Head of Lifelong Learning Partnerships and is a Senior Fellow of the HEA. Valerie's practice and research explores the perceptions that individuals have relating to their personal and social identities, including self-concept and self-categorisation. Valerie is particularly interested in the development of student voice and the spaces within which dialogue occurs between students and teachers. She has explored the frameworks and layers within and around communities of practice and has a focus on ecological learning systems and the potential for these to be utilized further in student-teacher interactions.

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Two-sentence summary:

'Student Voice' has become a 'portmanteau' term (Fielding, 2009) that competes between two narratives – student voice as transformational and democratic, as a partnership approach; and student voice as espoused through policy, strategic initiatives and quality assurance requirements.

This paper explores literature and research to ask how spaces might be created to enable dialogue and 'stimulate reflection and the development of new thinking amongst teachers' (Messiou and Ainscow, 2015, cited in Bourke and Loveridge, 2016, p. 66).

140 character overview for Twitter:

Student Voice: Time for a conversation! Moving beyond a quasi-consumerist view to create opportunities for meaningful dialogue and partnership with our learners.

Key words

Student voice; learner involvement; primary; secondary; post-compulsory education; collaborative dialogue

Student Voice:

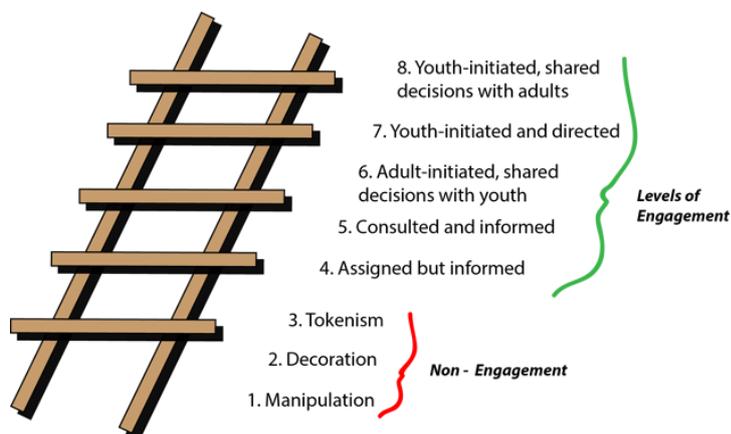
‘The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I *thought*, and attended to my answer.’ (Thoreau, 1863, p.1)

The work of Henry Thoreau encourages us to reflect on the ways in which we conduct ourselves, and to consider our interactions and the concerns we have for our ‘fellow beings’. For Thoreau, to have someone truly ‘listen’ to what he had to say was of enormous value; it was not simply ritual or extended politeness. So, when our learners are asked what they think, how well do we, and our institutions, *attend* to their answer(s)?

There has been much in the way of policy and rhetoric, and at foundation level, an honest intent to have constructive dialogue with learners in order to ‘shape services’ (Forrest et al., 2007; Walker and Logan, 2008). However, there remain concerns about the *value* and *worth* assigned to the outcomes of such discussion and the extent to which there are opportunities for meaningful involvement and engagement for students with their educational communities (Frost and Rogers, 2006; Rudduck and Fielding, 2006; Fielding, 2007; DeFur and Korinek, 2010; Mitra, Frick and Crawford, 2011; Robinson, 2014). Before reflecting on this further, it is useful to establish the literature and policy that has informed how student voice is positioned, and to consider what the implications – or possibilities – might be if we involved our learners in discussions regarding their interpretations of student voice, and the ways in which this might be developed (Hall, 2015, 2017).

Over recent decades education has witnessed a shift in approaches to student voice. Initially, in the 1990s we started with something else - an alignment to Hart’s *Ladder of Participation* (1992) and shared discourses that aimed to enable learners to develop ‘greater self-esteem, heightened self-confidence, interpersonal and political skills, and self-efficacy’ (Frost, 2008, p. 356).

Ladder of Participation (1992)



Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation from Tokensim to Citizenship*
Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

This was much more about seeing ‘learning through the learner’s eyes (Ramsden, 1998, p.353) and established ‘modes of sharing’ (Bernstein, 2000, p 174 cited in Arnot & Reay, 2007, p. 318). The New Labour government (1997 – 2010) promised hope, with Tony Blair’s famous ‘Education, Education, Education’ speech to the Labour Party Annual Conference in Brighton, 1997. A number of policy documents came forth that echoed Hart’s (1992) focus. Responding in essence to the earlier United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), two of these - (DfES, 2001) *Learning to Listen: Core Principles for Involvement of Children and Young People*, and DfES (2003) *Every Child Matters* initiated a number of reforms alongside the Children Act (2004) that stressed the importance of

children being provided with opportunities to be responsible citizens. At international level, this has resulted in links being made between student voice, active citizenship and civic engagement (Bahou, 2011; Bergmark and Kostenius, 2011; Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012; Mitra, 2016). The Education Act (2002) also set in place a legal requirement for schools in the United Kingdom to engage and consult with their pupils. This was further strengthened when the DfE (2014) issued statutory guidance that schools had to 'provide opportunities for pupils to be consulted on matters affecting them or contribute to decision-making in the school'; and a number of studies have been reviewed (Robinson, 2014) that explore the ways in which the perceptions of pupils in primary schools are afforded a 'space' in which to be 'heard'.

The post-compulsory aged sector was similarly affected, with the Foster Report (2005) establishing the legal obligation for Further Education colleges to have a formal Learner Involvement Strategy (LSC, 2007) that identified how students would be engaged in this as a collaborative process. This resulted in three key strands being evidenced by institutions in order to fulfil the quality assurance requirements of the Framework for Excellence, 2007 and the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA), 2008:

- a personalisation agenda that would strengthen teaching and learning by involving learners at an individual level;
- a 'collective' approach that would have learners who could be 'representative' of their peers
- the 'development' of the organisation through the creation of a learner involvement 'culture' with students contributing at various levels of decision-making

This has given rise to a number of formal 'roles' and routes of engagement: student representatives, student fora, student governors, the ubiquitous student survey, and sometimes students collaboratively involved, formally or informally, as co-researchers (Cook-Sather, 2006; Forrest et al. 2007; Shuttle, 2007; Walker and Logan, 2008; Katsifli and Green, 2010; Bahou, 2011; LSIS, 2012; Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2016; Seale, 2016). However, too often we find that whilst teachers and institutional leaders recognise the potential benefits of a greater degree of partnership between staff and students, it is frequently the 'pre-occupation with the assessment and standards agendas [that have served] to offset the extent to which they are prepared to involve pupils in decisions about their own learning' (Robinson, 2014, p. 9).

Katsifli and Green's work (2010, p.5) used their access to the 157 Group of FE colleges, generating data from 28 of these member institutions. They similarly identified key themes that echoed the earlier QIA (2008) recommendations: formalised systems to foster student representation; processes to collect student feedback, including responses to this; and opportunities for the active involvement of students in the 'design and delivery of their own learning'. What emerges from this, however, is that in establishing this sense of 'consistency' and greater rigour, student voice becomes reified into a 'thing' to be benchmarked. No longer seen as representative of the individual, it becomes an homogenous 'metric' whose value can be 'measured' with the practice of listening to learners 'related to eliciting pupils' views primarily for performativity purposes' (Robinson, 2014, p 19). If we are not careful, this will result in 'surface compliance' (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006, p 228) that rather than focusing on the outcomes (Seale, 2016) will lose sight of these voices and become bogged down in the *processes*, with the dominant discourse being driven by *governance, representation and rights* (Fielding, 2001, 2004).

It can be seen that in the last 10 years in particular, changes within government policies and various strategic initiatives have moved us to a point where we are in an increasingly marketised environment. We no longer talk of student *voice* but of *student satisfaction*. A reified *thing* has been created that can be *measured* and contribute to an institution's *ranking*. With huge changes to funding structures, and publication of league tables, this *voice* has acquired commercial value. Rather than a philosophy of educational engagement, student voice has become subsumed within a portmanteau term (Fielding, 2009) that sees the 'notion of voice' (Frost, 2008, p. 354) as attuned to supporting improvement plans and various quality assurance frameworks that can improve one's ranking – and so attract more students and thus more income!

How has that voice been interpreted?

So, what lessons can we draw from the literature that will enable a more informed approach to student voice? There are concerns amongst teachers that at times, and in a more quasi-consumerist environment, more 'worth' is attached to the students' voice, than their own (Bahou, 2011). It can be reassuring to explore what others have tried, although recent research is limited. However, LSIS produced a practice-based guide in 2012 that included some 30 case studies of various learner voice strategies taken from 22 wide-ranging post-compulsory institutions across the UK. These examples included students involved in more usual formats such as student councils and fora, but also talked about students being trained and involved with teaching observations; as co-creators of a scheme of work; as mentors and quality champions; in addition to feedback around assessment models and co-researchers. However, even when there was a move away from seeing students simply as the producers of feedback data (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2016) used for metrics and benchmarking analysis, a recent New Zealand school study (Bourke and Loveridge, 2016) noted that teachers often interpret student feedback from a pedagogical and curriculum focus, rather than what was of interest to the students – the learning. Rather than exploring the responses from the students in terms of their frame of reference, the teachers simply re-oriented 'the focus back towards curriculum and the key competencies' (Bourke and Loveridge, 2016, p 65).

Highlighting the 'potential role learners can play as *game changers*' in quality assurance LSIS (2012, p. 3) very much built on earlier research by FutureLab (Rudd, Colligan and Naik, 2006; Walker and Logan, 2008) and that focus on how pupils can contribute to *improvements in quality assurance* through that 'ladder of engagement' and the 'evolution of 'genuine' learner voice along a continuum' (LSIS, 2012, p. 5). This Talking Learner Voice (TLV) initiative echoes Hart's (1992) Ladder of Engagement, with that same desire to see that range of involvement from *informing* at one end, through *consulting*, *involving*, *collaborating* and *empowering* at the end. Yet even though these five steps can be iterative, cumulative, or be regarded as describing a 'maturing relationship between learners, practitioners and the organisation' (LSIS, 2012, p. 5), they still do not identify how students are intrinsically and directly involved in enabling that change. For this to occur there needs to be 'a reconceptualisation of the roles of pupils and teachers and the development of new understandings about the possibilities and potential' that may exist; including finding different ways of engaging with our learners in order to empower them to lead their own learning (Robinson, 2014, p. 19).

What has been tried?

DeFur and Korinek (2010, p.15) focused their work on middle and high schools in the USA. They wanted to explore what students thought about what influences learning. The main outcome from this was that systems and structures need to be created in which 'all students can have a voice and contribute to the governance and community of secondary education'. Again based in the USA, Toshalis and Nakkula (2012, p. 24) drew similar conclusions with their research identifying the need for a 'spectrum of student voice oriented activity'. This 'activity' could range from initial interest,

through to collaboration and consultation, participation and partnership, to having sufficient agency to initiate and lead change. A cautionary note from Mitra (2008, 2016) however, who also works with schools in the USA, reminds us that such initiatives can be flawed. Often, they are designed in such a way that they result in engagement with those voices that are easiest to hear, who know *how* to talk and who have the confidence to articulate their views (Powney and Hall, 1998; Forrest et al., 2007; Tedder, Jones and Mauger, 2008; Breslin, 2011; Robinson, 2014). This can result in a learner élite – a ‘professional’ student voice (Fielding, 2004; Collinson, 2007; Walker and Logan, 2008) and we are probably all aware that frequently ‘it is the same students who sit on the school council, act as student researchers, gain appointments as prefects...’ and who are able to further develop the ‘ability to get their voice across’ (Breslin, 2011, p. 67). This does not, however, mean that they will want to continuously engage and an oft-quoted phrase heard from teachers throughout the year is that students are ‘surveyed out!’ as they endure a sense of a ‘scattergun’ bombardment of systems and structures, of ‘questionnaire fatigue’ (LSIS, 2012, p. 8).

Ways forward

So, what could we do to move beyond some of those aspects that ‘inhibit agency and diminish the hope of change’ (Frost, 2008, p. 355)? As teachers, where are the opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue and partnership with our students? We can see from recent research and policy that importance is being, and has been accorded to the act of listening, but the purposes for which this is done are what need to be considered (Tedder, Jones, & Mauger, 2008, p. 25).

Returning to that initial desire to have a shared discourse with students (Hart, 1992), exploratory research has been undertaken over the last year that might be useful to the discussion: one formal study (Hall, 2017) and one informal case study reported anecdotally to me by a secondary school teacher who, having discussed my research with me, decided to trial something in her school in the South West of the United Kingdom.

Building on this earlier work (Hall, 2015; 2017) the research explored what student voice might mean from an individual’s perspective across diverse roles, environments and curriculum settings. Working with 51 participants from across four FE colleges, comprising of quality assurance managers, teacher educators, student teachers, and students, the aim was to consider ways in which those elements that ‘inhibit agency and diminish the hope of change’ (Frost, 2008, p. 355) might be overcome and to explore where there could be opportunities to do something different.

There was an overwhelming sense of student voice being used to generate data; of surveys being used to inform ‘satisfaction rates advertised on the back of the bus!’ and to ‘rate things’ through ‘one giant survey’ rather than as a means to engage in a discussion that could result in meaningful feedback. Staff felt pressured to ‘prime students’ ahead of surveys and were frustrated by the constant demands: ‘I love my teaching, but I can’t be doing with all this.’ Yet students did feel ‘valued’ and wanted to contribute, but there was a sense that feedback was focused more on the institutional context rather than on them as individuals. There were concerns about what happened to feedback provided and a sense of only some ‘voices’ being heard. They wanted more opportunities for different types of discussions and two-way dialogue, with one insightful comment being ‘Give students more discussions so they can actually see change and be a part of it.’

The second study was a small-scale project with a Year 7 class. Framing this within the context of wanting to improve as a teacher and looking at how the students could contribute to this, some 15 students initially volunteered with 10 of these attending a follow-up lunch-time meeting.

Having explained the format of the original research and the idea of engaging in an ongoing two-way dialogue, the teacher asked the students for ideas about how this might be taken forward: a 'suggestion box' was made. The volunteers were really enthusiastic, making the box and drafting a short pro-forma to go with it. Ground rules were established about 'being kind' and not including names, but it was agreed that year group would be included so that any changes introduced could be specific to that cohort.

Students were also asked if they had any questions and one query resulted in the introduction of 'optional homework' that could be done if they wished to alongside what was already set. It took a while to get the box set up, and the teacher created a display so that all classes could see how to make use of it. However, despite the teacher reminding students about this several times nothing happened. This prompted a great deal of reflection on the part of the teacher who felt this might be because students are so conditioned to ask for feedback that it would take a long time for them to start to offer their own ideas; equally, it could be that the suggestion box idea was not the best format. Aside from this, the teacher has had regular correspondence with individual students via email and the institution's online homework platform, so perhaps the ongoing dialogue is already taking place and the suggestion box wasn't needed!

On the basis of this initial project, the teacher has gone on to research theory relating to written feedback, set up a working party and is piloting this within this same class. Again, explaining what was being trialled and why. This time the class were consulted via Survey Monkey, asking them what was good / could be improved about the feedback they currently receive, and asking for ideas to trial. Two approaches are now being piloted across three sub-groups, with participants randomly assigned to a group. After four weeks, students were surveyed again and initial results indicated that a 'one size fits all' approach to written feedback is not appropriate. This is now going to be refined and taken forward for further research in the coming academic year.

Perhaps a comment made by one of the participants in 2017 (Hall) research is a useful lens through which to view what happened in the second case study: 'If you're asking students to reflect on their learning experience, it's...that's a big question. Do they really know what they're actually answering?'

Although we may acknowledge, that 'pupils are expert witnesses, they are experts in knowing about [...] what helps and what hinders their learning' (Robinson, 2014, p.19), we need to empower them to recognise and believe in their capacity to contribute to these discussions and to explore ways in which we can enable such conversations.

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