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Developing and Listening to Student Voices through a Student-Staff Research Project

How can we listen to student voices in order to improve learning, teaching and the curriculum? If we, as members of staff, are to enable students to learn effectively we need to understand how they are engaging with their studies, how they are developing concepts and how they are connecting to their subjects, their fellow learners and their teachers. We need to find out how they understand and use their environments and resources for learning. Students nowadays are expected to respond to numerous institutional and national requests for information, designed with a 'market research' approach. As Batchelor (2008) notes, 'Students are trapped in a paradox: endlessly canvassed and consulted through course quality

evaluation questionnaires, it is as if theirs are the voices everyone longs to hear. But the restricted scope of the commercial language of evaluation can have the effect of silencing them.' Theirs becomes the voice of the consumer, rather than one of the voices in a partnership of enquiry into practice and how it can be developed. Rowland (2000) has pointed out that systems, such as student feedback questionnaires, can be seen as 'limiting rather than enhancing communication between teachers and students.' It becomes a one-way evaluation rather than a dialogue.

In order to hear what students would like to say about their learning experiences we need to facilitate their voices. They need opportunities to enquire into their experiences, to link their findings with those of others and to understand different perspectives. They need to develop appropriate ways of communicating what they know to people so that they will be listened to. In many ways they need to act as researchers.

In the Faculty of Humanities, Law and Education at the University of Hertfordshire, we identified that one of the aspects of students' experience that we were interested in was students' responses to feedback and how they were using it to develop their work. We wanted to obtain students' views on this. We also wanted to find ways of working collaboratively with students so that they could communicate effectively and we could deepen our understanding of the student experience. We decided to initiative a student-staff research project into feedback in the Faculty.

We decided not to select students who were already engaged with us as student representatives on programmes, for example, as we were looking to develop and hear different voices. The student union employment agency identified students from each school in the Faculty who would be paid to work with us for 16 hours during the Spring term.

The Process

Five students and three members of staff met together for the first session. This group size was chosen so that staff would not outnumber students and so that there would be opportunities for everyone to contribute. In order for staff and students to develop effective working relationships we needed to develop connections with each other. We found many ways in which we were connected including places we had visited, films we had seen amongst others. Sharing these topics in a relaxed environment started to help us see each other as people rather than roles. We could then move on to discussing the focus of the project and how we were going to undertake our research.

The student-staff team worked together to identify a research approach and to complete Faculty ethics procedures. We spent time exploring issues of confidentiality and the sensitive nature of our topic. We decided that students would collect data from other students about feedback as the student-researchers felt that students would be 'more honest' with other students. The student researchers would then work with staff to analyse the data and to put it into the wider context of their own experience and other research reports and articles on the topic.

The student-researchers asked 86 students from across the Faculty the questions we had developed from our discussions. These were: 1) What do you consider to be feedback? 2) What was the impact of feedback? and 3) How have you used feedback. They asked these questions of an opportunistic sample over a period of two weeks. Before starting the data collection we had discussed issues that could arise including how to deal with situations when people won't engage with you. It is not easy to approach people you don't know to ask them questions and it was important to explore what could happen so that shared approaches could be discussed. The students were very persistent and worked hard to collect a significant amount of data.

Many projects looking at feedback ask student informants for information and then staff analyse the data and interpret the findings. We were aiming to build students' abilities to identify and share knowledge about the topic so they needed to be participants in the whole project. We met as a group to analyse the data. We read data aloud and shared ideas about emerging themes. Everyone was new to this data set so we were all able to suggest themes and students and staff were equally perceptive. It was very important at this stage for us all to pay attention to each others ideas and to use supportive listening skills. We were modelling how we were valuing contributions and building our understanding together. A research fellow talked with us about coding data and students and staff worked in pairs to begin to do this. We spent three sessions analysing the data.

A key part of the work was the discussion between students and staff about experiences of feedback. Students were able to talk in detail about different aspects of their feedback experience and also hear some staff perspectives. The discussion was undertaken in a professional way and no names of staff or students were used. This discus-

sion was more than a focus group in which we gained the ideas of some students. Instead it was a deeper learning experience as over a number of sessions we all sought to understand the issues better by drawing on data we collected, our own experience and some of the research in the field that we read and brought into the discussion. Between sessions each member of the group kept a reflective journal about the project. This was personal to them but they could use it in the discussions as appropriate. We all found that we started paying more attention to feedback and thinking about the topic than we had done previously. Some students talked on-line or in person to friends at other universities about feedback approaches. This was enabling all involved to articulate our understanding of the topic.

One way of articulating and sharing our knowledge on the topic was a written report.

[click the link here](#)



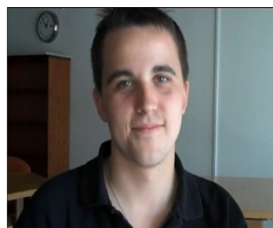
There was not time to involve the students in writing this report although they commented on drafts. In future projects it will be important to plan for students to write sections in order to develop their writing voices. Another way of sharing information was a PowerPoint and oral presentation at an internal Learning and Teaching conference for staff.

[click the link here](#)

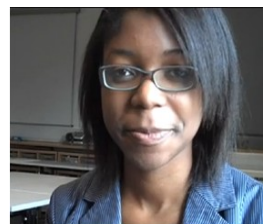


The student-researchers were introduced to the facilities available in the School of Education to make a video of their presentation, the 'Vox Box' and used it to record their work. They then presented this in a lecture theatre for staff and were able to respond to questions.

[Click the Image to view the student recordings](#)



Humanities Student



Law Student

After the completion of the project we explored what we had learned about working together as a student-staff group. Students felt that they had gained skills in working with staff, in research approaches, communication and presentation skills. They also felt highly motivated to do more work in this way and hoped to be an influence in bringing

about change in the University. One of the students is planning to lead a project for first year students on how feedback at university is different from school and how one can make best use of feedback. Another student is aiming to work in her school and to help other students develop as student-researchers.

For all the staff involved it was a new way of working. From the onset we all agreed that the project was undertaken in this way because not only did we want to collect information on the topic but we also wanted to model a staff-student process to enquiring into, and developing, learning and teaching. Staff made time to develop relationships between the group members which was imperative as it enabled everyone's confidence to grow, allowing them to talk more openly. However, what most surprised and delighted staff was the level of risk-taking that grew from this way of working, with students confidently presenting the project to various audiences, using a range of technology.

We wanted to engage in 'transforming assumptions about students' role in the campus community...' (Nicholls, 2005), and this project has we feel gone a long way to achieving this. There's still more work to be done, but strong foundations have now been laid for making a step change in integrating the student voice into learning and teaching.

References

Batchelor, D (2008) Have students got a voice? In Barnett, R & Di Napoli, R *Changing Identities in Higher Education: Voicing Perspectives* Abingdon: Routledge pp40-54

Nicholls, G (2005) *The Challenge to Scholarship: Rethinking learning, teaching and research* Abingdon: Routledge

Rowland, S (2000) *The Enquiring University Teacher* Buckingham: Open University