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What Student Voice is and is Not: Connecting Dialogue to Evidence-Based Practice and Inclusive Mindsets

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What Student Voice is and is Not: Connecting Dialogue to Evidence-Based Practice and Inclusive Mindsets

Abstract

Traditional attitudes to student voice are changing which is highlighted in the recent proliferation of student voice manuscripts the Journal is receiving. Student voice literature currently positions students as active dialogue partners in higher education with much to contribute rather than passive consumers or evaluators. As Editors of the Student Experience section, we view this development in higher education as a significant and emerging trend which has the potential to positively impact practice in higher education and also contribute toward meaningful relational changes for the student experience. We offer some guidelines and recommendations for potential authors on what student voice is and what it is not. We welcome manuscripts that leverage student voice by connecting genuine student-teacher dialogue and articulating how student voice has contributed toward collaboration, change, and empowerment. Manuscripts that articulate how an authentic student voice connects to evidence-based practice and creates inclusive mindsets are also welcome.

Practitioner Notes

1. Student voice manuscripts need to connect genuine voice with how students have contributed toward collaboration, change and empowerment.
2. Student voice studies should include a clear take-home message and international application for readers to implement in other contexts.
3. Student voice has the potential to create dialogue partners and positively impact the student experience in higher education.
4. Student voice articles published by JUTLP have increased in the last five years demonstrating a substantial impact on practice.
5. Student voice is changing from the traditional unit/course experience surveys and tokenistic representation on higher education governance committees to an increasing recognition of integrated and co-creational roles involving pedagogy, curriculum and equity consultation.

Keywords

Student voice; student experience, students as partners, student representation, higher education

Introduction

Student voice is integral to the university student experience and has the potential to provide significant feedback on what constitutes quality teaching and learning, engender a sense of belonging, improve student success outcomes and the residual impact on retention before, during and after their higher education pathway. Student voice has expanded over the last two decades to become less tokenistic from the primary purpose of evaluating units of study at universities, to evolve now as a more empowering and engaging force for equitable and democratic participation in higher education. Beyond participation, student voice is an increasingly dynamic influencer of educational partnerships in teaching and learning, co-creation in course development, pedagogy consultation and co-authorship yet the definition of student voice is often unclear and a misnomer in some studies.

Student voice has been defined as the “consultative wing of pupil participation” (Ruddock, 2005, p. 1) while Cook-Sather (2006) claims there is “no simple, fixed definition or explication of the term” (p. 363). Some researchers indicate that student voice involves many activities that “encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue, and action on matters that primarily concern students, but also, by implication, school staff and the communities that they serve” (Fielding & McGregor, 2005, p. 2). Thus, the term student voice has a nebulous quality which at times lacks differentiation between student voice as representation and student voice as partnership (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022).

What is clear is that student voice is emerging as an inclusive and positive impact in the higher education student experience. At present, the *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* (JUTLP) receives a significant volume of manuscripts that argue to leverage concepts directly, or indirectly, connected to student voice. Some of these include attempts to embed students into research paper authorship, and others argue they offer a unique line of sight to the student experience through voice. Other manuscripts provide extensive narratives not backed up by data or tables of mathematical derivations but little or no evidence of that voice. Many manuscripts fail to articulate the connection of a genuine student voice. Thus, the purpose of this editorial is to clarify what student voice is and what student voice is not, particularly in relation to the reasons why we reject some papers submitted that claim a reference to student voice.

Background

The literature from the last two decades presents a strong case that students have authentic and valuable voices in the decisions that influence their learning and education (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022), particularly as expert witnesses to what matters most to them after sitting in numerous classrooms over the years (Ruddock, 2005). Conner (2022) claims student voice is a useful strategy to engage students in “sharing their views on their experiences as students in order to promote meaningful change in educational

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practice or policy” (p. 12). Yet students are not often asked what they think despite this revealing source of information for educators and policymakers (Ashton-Hay, in press). Student voice is not always the “messenger of student dissatisfaction” (Black & Mayes, 2020, p. 1066) and does not always require “tone police” to avoid teacher distress (Biddle & Hufnagle, 2019, p. 514). Although mainly used as evaluation of teacher performance as a core business in higher education (Ali et al., 2021), many students are cautious about offering any critique on the quality of teaching or curriculum before receiving grades. The potential benefits from listening, sharing and collaborating can lead to improvements in teaching and learning as well as influencing the student experience, study success and retention (Cook-Sather, 2018; 2020).

History of Student Voice

Student voice gained credibility in the 1990s as market logic of the student as consumer began to evolve. Students started to become “respected and empowered influencers of educational reform” (Catto & Burns, 2017, p. 34). This fresh perspective may have resulted from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) and recognition that children have a legal right to participate in decisions which affect their lives. Specifically, Article 12 claims that all children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting the child and Article 13 reiterates free expression for young people. The recognition of children’s rights allowed formerly silenced voices to speak up, be heard and participate more effectively in individual classroom and school decision-making in Australia as well as internationally (Holdsworth, 2013; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015; Quinn & Owen, 2016). Although tertiary age students are considered young adults, their voice is equally important in expressing opinions about what matters in their educational experience. By listening to student voice, educators gain insight into building safe environments of trust and respect (Quaglia & Fox, 2018) and creating dialogic spaces where students can voice the hopes, dreams, fears, and frustrations of their lived experience (Ward, 2014). Other scholars emphasise “a sense of shared responsibility for teaching and learning” (Cook-Sather, 2015, p. 3), “care and empathy” (Baroutsis et al., 2016, p. 132) and belonging, confidence and engagement (Flynn, 2014). Some scholars believe that student voice links mainly to educational settings (Biddle, 2019; Conner et al., 2015) while others believe that student voice can relate to any factors that influence students’ lives, either in or out of education (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). This has certainly been the case in drawing attention to sustainability and global environmental issues such as climate change.

In the last decade, relevant classroom practice evolved by including student voice in instructional design (Cohen, 2003; Mitra, 2001; Prieto, 2001; Silva, 2001). Besides consultation, student voice is also included in participation, collaboration, leadership and intergenerational learning (Fielding, 2011; Fleming, 2012; Mayes, 2013; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Campbell (2011) argues that student voice elevates student perspectives on the issues that matter to them in the classroom or school and Mitra and Gross (2009) state that student voice relates to the many “opportunities to share in school decisions” (p. 523). This brief overview of the evolution of student voice provides an understanding of how what matters most to students can be used to improve the quality of their educational experience and develop their own agency.

One of the key strengths of student voice is the prospect of hearing from the silent or silenced, and to understand better ways of engaging them. Brady and Scully (2005) define engagement as

“the active participation of stakeholders, including students, in the development and implementation of decisions relating to classroom rules and procedures” (p. 159). According to their perspective, engagement and student voice are important elements in considering and planning teaching and learning practices. Quinn and Owen (2016) warn against “manipulation and tokenism” (p. 60) and recommend approaches to overcome these concerns. Any apprehensions may be especially true of international students who are adapting to an unfamiliar learning environment, an additional language and a new culture. The rigour of higher education needs to demonstrate accountability (Ashton-Hay & Chanock, 2023; Delany et al., 2016; Parker, 2011) and lecturers require skills as pedagogic technicians (Cowling et al., 2022) to engage students effectively. In this sense, teachers will consider optimal ways to present learning opportunities and match with the appropriate technology that best affords such opportunities. Students value-add to their educational qualifications and skill sets for improved employment prospects (Queensland Government, 2020). The student voice thus becomes paramount in benchmarking quality education and best teaching practice.

Contemporary Student Voice

Recently, student voice has pointed toward the need for belongingness and the desire to have a sense of connectedness to the institution where students study (Kinash, 2021). Some studies have highlighted the impact from the pandemic and consequent isolation as key factors in student need for social contact (Tice et al., 2021). Remote learning challenged many students who lacked the ability to concentrate in long lectures without the “physical presence of co-viewers” (Tice et al., 2021, p. 6). There is evidence from other studies (Sotardi, 2022; Yorke, 2016) demonstrating that when students consider themselves as belonging to a specific institution, their academic performance is generally higher than those who do not experience a similar sense of belongingness. Part of belongingness is the feeling of welcome, support, respect, and safety in an environment (Jiang & Jiang, 2015; Suhlmann et al., 2018). Gilken and Johnson (2019) found that a community of practice and instructional interventions influence a student’s sense of belonging in a university environment and “encourages persistence which supports academic success and can lead to degree completion” (p. 32). Gilken and Johnson’s study (2019) revealed that engaging in strong information networks with other students and staff could increase persistence and continuity in study, while studies in Canada (Spencer et al., 2020) indicate that the use of educational technologies may promote positive learning environments and student success. Teachers who use educational technology and create a sense of belonging through communication networks may go a long way to supporting constructive learning environments. Overall, the student voice literature indicates that when students feel like they belong, they experience better success and more positive study outcomes.

Contemporary researchers believe that when students interact with educators, the “relationship between ‘voice’ and ‘agency’ or ‘action’ (Holdsworth, 2000, p. 357) is strong” (Cook-Sather, 2020, p. 183). This interaction may lead to co-creation on a number of levels in their educational experience (Cook-Sather, 2022). The perspectives of students potentially have transformational possibilities to empower other students and themselves, engender success and engagement as well as improve retention. Marginalised young people may be able to effect equitable changes in educational spaces (Gonzales et al., 2017) and gather greater consensus for social justice (Mansfield, 2014; Salisbury et al., 2019; Taines, 2014). More recent moves in education involve

partnering with students through conference presentations and web-based forums as well as journal or newsletter article co-authorship (Ashton-Hay et al., 2020a, 2020b; Cook-Sather, 2014, 2022) and curricula design (Tuhkala et al., 2021). The co-authorship aspect of student voice involves collaborating with students for research and publication, hearing from the marginalised, and partnership in shaping the governance structures of institutions (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022). Inclusion of student voice may present challenges if educators and administrators do not wish to hear, yet may need to hear (Catto & Burns, 2017) or, alternatively if they experience emotional dissonance which seems to be a necessary precursor leading to future positive change (Golombok & Johnson, 2004). Student voice has gained momentum and credibility as a worthy dialogue in sustainable and engaging education (Edes, 2020). Student voice certainly has the capacity to not only improve teaching and learning but also make a positive impact on the student experience because of what matters most to students.

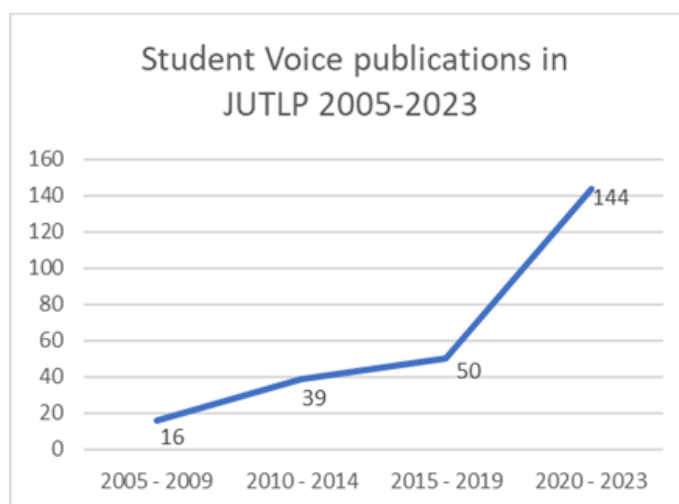
How student voice has changed in JUTLP

When used to inform, educate and create change, student voice has the potential to capture salient moments with a magnetic, resonant appeal well worth listening to and according to current trends, that appeal is rapidly increasing. The growth and proliferation of student voice can be seen in the expanding bandwidth of manuscripts published in the Journal. *The Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice* has published a total of 247 articles on student voice. Figure 1 shows the growth incline in student voice publications in JUTLP 2005-2023 with an average of 3.2 student voice publications per year, or 16 articles, from 2005-2009. The second period from 2010-2014, shows an increase to an average of 7.8 publications per year compared to the previous period. During 2015-2019, there was a slight increase of 2.2 more publications per year than the previous period. After 2019, the number of student voice publications skyrocketed to 144 articles published between 2020-2023, indicating an additional 18.8 publications per year on average during the final five-year period. These statistics demonstrate how student voice has flourished recently in the Journal.

Remarkably, the scope of topics has changed focus every few years, indicating how students have become more involved as key stakeholders in their own educational experiences. For example, in 2005, some of the key topics were internationalisation of the curriculum (Das, 2005), the cultural context of plagiarism (Handa & Power, 2005), group work (Mylett & Gluck, 2005) and Turnitin acknowledgement (Sutherland-Smith & Carr, 2005). In 2010, two popular articles were *Beyond Listening to Student Voice* (Partridge & Sandover, 2010) and *Digital Technology Education and the Impact on Traditional Academic Roles and Practice* (Sappey & Relf, 2010). In 2011, an article

Figure 1

Student Voice publications in JUTLP 2005-2023



with 22,365 downloads was *The Pros and Cons of Problem-based Learning from the Teacher's Standpoint* (Ribeiro, 2011) and *Factors that Encourage Student Engagement* (Russell & Slater, 2011) with 6,622 downloads (at time of writing).

In 2015-2016, a robust technology theme emerged in many of the student voice papers and focused on student tech preferences, apps for music technology, flipped and blended classrooms, using popular culture in teaching, using video to engage students, and STEM education. Other articles focused on pre-service teachers, conceptual frameworks, student self-assessment, self-efficacy, writing communities, and academic literacies. Two of the most downloaded articles are *Using Learning Analytics to Assess Students' Learning in Online Courses* (Martin & Ndoye, 2016) with 3,361 downloads and *Reflection for Learning, Learning for Reflection: Developing Indigenous Competencies in Higher Education* (Bennett et al., 2016) with 15,207 downloads.

In 2020-2023, student voice publications in JUTLP leaped to 144 and the year is not over. Key topics were work-integrated learning, service learning, experiential learning, digital learning, collaborative education games and game design, mindfulness, peer-pairing with staff, peer feedback and students as partners. There were also articles detailing technology use in teaching and learning as anatomy demonstrators and the use of Padlet, Kahoots and Cirrus for argumentation in the 21st century. In 2021, popular publications focused on digital resilience (Eri et al., 2021) with 1,651 downloads, creating 'Covid-safe' face-to-face teaching (Khan et al., 2021) with 2,148 downloads and redressing gender inequity in academia (Allen et al., 2021) with 2,450 downloads in the past 18-24 months. The JUTLP editorial on student belongingness (Tice et al., 2021) also had 2,099 downloads since July 13, 2021. The expanding scope and range of student voice publications attests to the burgeoning allure of the many ways students can influence their educational experience.

What Student Voice is, and is Not

At this point, we offer authors some specific recommendations for discussing student voice in a JUTLP article. The following recommendations relate to what student voice is, and is not, in a JUTLP context.

1. *Students are vital key stakeholders in their own educational experiences and articles need to articulate the connection and show evidence of their voices.*

Student voice may describe a variety of mechanisms used to empower students to make contributions to the planning, design, development, delivery and evaluation of initiatives that influence their educational experiences (Young and Jerome, 2020). In a general sense, student voice often involves giving students the opportunity to work alongside educational leaders to inform discussions, decisions and actions taken to develop or modify curricula. These topics can provide rich discussion enhanced by authentic student voice.

2. *Articulate the connection of genuine student voice in your article so it is clear from the start.*

Equitable representation of students through local and national student associations (Klemenčič, 2012) as well as all committee, board or panel structures that are involved in decisions on the direction of educational programmes (Garwe, 2015) can provide studies that facilitate the development of student-centred and student-focused learning by challenging staff assumptions

about learning and teaching (Brooman et al., 2014) and hearing from the marginalised. The successful integration of student voice can also lead to improved levels of engagement and a greater sense of community amongst students. We welcome articles that front-end authentic student voice for this purpose.

3. Student voice is not tokenistic representation that lacks access to dialogue or negotiation.

One of our students, representing an identified equity demographic stood for a student governance position in their faculty. They were delighted to be elected and pro-actively sought consensus from their cohort to present responsibly at the faculty meeting. When asked how the meeting had gone, the student's crestfallen voice explained, "They just wanted me to rubber stamp their agenda, tick the box and not say anything." That student was disappointed by the managerialist agenda and the lack of dialogue or negotiation that reinforced a neoliberal model of marketised education. The student believed their representation on the faculty governance committee was tokenistic and did not actually represent the student cohort. Genuine student voice should be clear and audibly discernable in a text which contributes towards dialogue, negotiation, change or difference. Even studies detailing tensions in dialogue negotiation or partnership relationships, are often not reported yet can provide authentic examples of student voice. We welcome these discussion articles.

4. Student voice should be representative of an entire cohort rather than one or two individuals.

Including a single student representative on a single committee may be limiting as described in the anecdote above and the student input may not be truly representative of the cohort as a whole. Student voice studies may be more effectively articulated when representation from a variety of student partners allows students to contribute in a number of different ways. We are looking for papers that include examples of more than one or two individuals.

Student voice that details collaborative partnerships, such as input into curricula, assessment choices, co-creation of educational resources and research partnerships, provide validity as long as the voice is clearly articulated and connected in the text. There are a range of examples of mechanisms used to allow student voice to feed into curricula including co-creation of curricula and/or specific educational materials, engaging students as partners in researching educational experiences (Wilson et al., 2020), and input into decisions made about how courses are assessed (Hemming & Power, 2021). The Journal is interested in studies that articulate collaborative student-teacher partnerships.

5. Student voice can provide an important mechanism for helping to drive change.

Studies that facilitate the development of inclusive curricula (e.g. Kaur-Aujla, 2021) or allow under-represented minority groups opportunities to inform and influence key decisions relating to their educational experiences are encouraged. Tell us about steps taken to help ensure that the educational experiences are designed and structured in ways that reflect the diversity present amongst the student cohort. We welcome articles that describe and detail the development of inclusive mindsets in innovative ways.

6. Student voice is not the use of end of course or end of degree surveys.

In addition to initiatives not permitting appropriate student representation in governance structures, the use of end of course or end of degree surveys do not allow students to provide a dynamic and evolving input into the design, development and/or evolution of a curriculum. The limitations associated with using these types of surveys have been recognised (Borch et al, 2020). As Editors, we also view these limitations as inauthentic examples of student voice.

7. *Student voice tends to be most effective and valuable when the student contribution is made voluntarily.*

Some of these examples include co-leading educational evaluation or research projects, co-authorship of publications, or meaningful representation in a variety of different committee, board and panel structures. Student contributions that are made as part of assessed activities that contribute to their educational outcomes, such as conducting an educational focused research project (Partridge & Sandover, 2010), may be of value but it is worth noting that student participants may feel that they have to favour a particular outcome or avoid being overly critical of faculty staff in order to achieve a high grade for the work. If student voice is compromised, this may pose a threat to study validity and should be appropriately acknowledged.

8. *Student voice studies should include an application for international readers in other contexts.*

Some manuscripts are localised to a specific area or context and need to ensure international readers will be able to apply the findings or recommendations in their own contexts.

Why We Reject Student Voice Related Papers

Editorial policy is to curate manuscripts representative of best practice in the sector. We look for papers that validate student voice equitably and fairly, and have clearly articulated connections to evidence-based student voice. We look for papers that have the potential to make a positive impact on the student experience anywhere in the world. Our editorial preference is to build quality relationships with authors rather than pronounce outright rejection. To avoid that option, authors are encouraged to follow some basic tips.

As mentioned in #9 above, many authors conduct studies that are very localised and miss the point on what is already known about student voice. Such local studies often omit any international application for their work. The research should be of interest to an international audience, so authors need to ensure they include useful practitioner notes and practical applications arising from their study. A manuscript contributing new knowledge or insight is favoured rather than just duplicating work that has already been done. Let readers understand how they can benefit from your student voice study and apply that knowledge or experience in their own context.

Some papers have little substance in the discussion section yet include pages of figures and mathematical derivations with scant evidence of actual student voice. The notion of student voice is leveraged but the evidence is limited or superficial. Some manuscripts narrate the student voice by telling readers what students thought or said but do not provide any evidence or connection to authentic quotations. Other papers are overly technical with too much jargon, while on the other hand, some are very simplistic and not written with an academic tone or vocabulary. Studies with a weak, unclear method or research framework are also often rejected, particularly if the student

voice is not framed or substantiated sufficiently. Sometimes data is interpreted poorly or the discussion makes claims not backed up by evidence from the data.

Currency of content is significant in publishing research and outdated literature reviews, for example, do not present the same edge achieved by papers citing up-to-date studies. A manuscript should position the study in a context of what has happened up to that point and it may require more than a single paragraph to effectively flesh out the story. To ensure optimal consideration of your manuscript for publication in JUTLP, follow these tips and the author guidelines on our webpage.

Studies We Welcome

We welcome authentic student voice articles that articulate innovative work with students as co-curricular designers and pedagogical consultants. The Journal especially welcomes evidence-based studies that utilise and leverage student voice through interactions such as dialogue partnerships, curriculum co-design and pedagogical consultations as equalising forces.

We welcome papers that validate authentic student voice and offer evidence-based proof of difference, impact or change. We are particularly interested in student opinion on current issues in higher education such as the use of Artificial Intelligence, curricular interventions, partnerships and learner-teacher dialogue as equalising forces in higher education today or how marginalised voices are being heard. We anticipate manuscripts that describe how student voice is authentically structured into teaching and learning, policy and procedure. We also look forward to papers that deconstruct situations, approaches, programs and plans where student voice has leveraged the experience.

The invited commentary in this issue by Cook-Sather and Matthews introduces three anchoring principles for practising student voice in higher education. These three principles provide compelling guidelines for building student voice into the curriculum and developing inclusive mindsets. We invite papers based on these anchoring principles for the practise of student voice and even take up their challenge to re-define our JUTLP theme of student experience. With the broad range of student experience topics proliferating over the past three years, we anticipate receiving more manuscripts that highlight the authentic integration of student voice to enhance, equalise and empower students in their higher education experience.

Conclusion

Student voice has a long-standing history and proven value in educational studies which have evolved beyond traditional tokenistic and superficial representation in student councils and end of course surveys on the quality of teaching in academia. The past two decades of publications in JUTLP demonstrate the progression and advancement of how student voice has become more integrated into student-teacher partnerships, curricula co-design, pedagogical consultation, and learner-teacher dialogue, often as hearing from the marginalised and equalising power dynamics. The range and scope of topics have changed over time as the focus on various themes in teaching and learning have evolved in higher education. From 2005-2009, an average of 3.2 student voice papers per year were published. After 2019, student voice publications jumped to 144 in the years from 2020-2023 with an average of 28.8 papers published each year. Student voice is proliferating in current times as administrators, policymakers and practitioners strive to create more inclusive

and equitable learning and teaching environments. As Editors, we see this moment as a progressive opportunity in developing and promoting meaningful student education experiences beyond superficiality and anchored by Cook-Sather and Matthews' (2023) principles of practising student voice in higher education. If students are offered opportunities that can be structured into authentic participation, they can become active, engaged, and empowered, leading to a sense of belonging, connectedness and improved student success and retention. Student voice work is happening in higher education and more practitioners, administrators and policymakers need to know about the value and benefits from this relational human endeavour.

Conflict of Interest

The authors disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their respective university. The authors have not used artificial intelligence in the creation of this editorial and comply with the five principles of JUTLP authorship.

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