Drawing on Lundy: A Holistic Approach to Student Voice and Participation

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Abstract

This case study is a reflection by the authors on a comprehensive and holistic departmental student voice strategy undertaken within the Department of Social Care and Social Work at The Manchester Metropolitan University. The authors approached student voice by drawing on their disciplinary knowledge and practice relating to participation and empowerment, and implemented integrated activities intended to create a supported and inclusive community for all learners. The authors' adaptation of the Lundy model (2007) in considering a rights-based approach to 'voice', has been instrumental in providing a framework to develop meaningful student participation and influence in teaching, curriculum and assessment design and offers the potential to reimagine how higher education providers can support a cultural shift towards embedding student voice and engagement.

Introduction

Policy Context

As recognised by Seale (2016, 2009) and Bishop (2018), the concept of student voice and active participation has a longstanding, regulated, yet often under-theorised role within contemporary Higher Education. Institutional and cultural expectations about student voice, participation and 'rights' differ across international, political and temporal contexts, often enacted through a patchwork of legal and regulatory requirements. This is best illustrated within the European Bologna Declaration and process (European Ministers of Education, 1999) which has moved from acceptance of students as 'full members of the higher education community' (European Ministers for Education, 2001) to the recognition of student participation and academic freedom as 'fundamental values' (European Higher Education Area, 2015). Despite this, the European Students Union notes that legislation to support this protocol is inconsistent, with only 50% signatory states having legislative and regulatory processes to ensure student participation in decision making (European Students Union, 2024).

Within the United Kingdom (UK) context and the location for this case study, the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2024) sets out the principle for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to take deliberate steps to engage students as partners and have student engagement 'embedded in the culture of providers' (QAA, 2024, p.5). With regards to enacted student rights, the UK has recently focused on legislating for academic freedom of speech for students and academic staff, (Higher Education (Freedom of

Speech) Act 2023), and in England the regulatory body, Office for Students, require evidence of institutional student engagement through their B2 conditions of ongoing registration (Office for Students, 2022).

At an operational level within the Higher Education community, student voice has gained increased visibility and trajectory through a continuum of activity supporting the visibility of participation and engagement, ranging from transactional feedback and evaluation surveys, locating students as consumers (Young & Jerome 2020), through to perceiving students as active agents and co-producers of the educational experience (Healey & Healey, 2019; Healey, 2023). Furthermore, the multiple ways student voice manifests can obscure important distinctions such as those between student representation and student partnerships (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023).

Theoretical considerations and background

In attempting to navigate this landscape, our departmental approach to student voice references our disciplinary perspectives, as social workers and community researchers. We outline the practical ways we have enacted this later in this paper, for example, by working with students to improve participation in decision making, support co-creation, and enhance student led insight. Our approach recognises the multiple ways in which democratic 'voice' and participation is historically interpreted and enacted. This includes the conceptualisation of a hierarchical ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969), pathways to participation (Shier, 2001) and, within Higher Education, as 'patterns of partnership' comprising distinct interconnected student voice typologies (Fielding, 2011). Reflecting Shier's (2001) recognition of the need for openings, opportunities, and obligations to participation and power sharing, we considered the need to conceptualise student voice as a core and foundational component inherent to the culture of the department, rather than a set of adjunct activities.

Drawing further on our disciplinary and practice background, our theoretical approach is implicitly informed by wider theoretical concepts of social justice, strengths-based practice, co-production, and values-led principles. This can be summarised by designing and delivering education provision 'with' the people it is designed for, epitomised by the liberatory slogan, 'Nothing About Us Without Us'. This philosophy was exemplified in our recognition of educational inequalities intensified by the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, and the Covid-19 pandemic. We felt compelled to respond to and support students, but soon realised our responses were not fully aligned with student experiences. The tangible lack of dialogical space to hear and respond to student voice, illuminated our limited knowledge and understanding of student perspectives.

Further, by considering our student profile and demographic data we also identified the need for more responsive opportunities to understand and gain insight into student experiences, and to take an empathic and attuned approach. This realisation follows principles of wider community participation, of meeting people where they were, and not expecting diverse representation within civic activities without purposeful reaching out. For example, for commuting students, and those with work and caring responsibilities, we recognised that student voice activities needed to be flexible and multiple to ensure all students could

participate. It was important that the opportunity to share experiences and views did not rely on engagement with wider student services or extra-curricular activities.

We also recognised that ongoing engagement and 'buy in' with student voice activity required a commitment to building trust, and mutual realisation that participatory effort and contributions were worthwhile. To highlight the importance of canvassing, hearing and collaborating with students, comparisons and inspiration were drawn from Laura Lundy's Participation Model (2007), which increasingly resonated with our conversations and became a useful reference point in our design of student voice activity.

Drawing on the Lundy Model of Participation

The Lundy model of participation is a conceptual framework designed to demonstrate ways in which children can exercise their right to have their views considered, relating to matters that impact them, as stated in article 12 of the UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). The model positions that in child participation 'voice is not enough' and space, voice, audience and influence are important chronological components (Lundy, 2007). The model reflected how we imagined we could move beyond the harvesting of student voice and opinion, to a more active culture of students influencing their educational experience.

Despite the original purpose of the Lundy Model as a vehicle to support advancements of defined and universally accepted 'rights', the model, as illustrated in Diagram 1, allowed us to consider how we could a) provide practical space and opportunity for voice, b) create opportunities for student partnership and co-creation of educational environments, curriculum and assessment, c) ensure an audience and proximity to operational and strategic decision makers, and d) ensure students could see the demonstratable influence and impact they had on departmental improvement plans and actions.
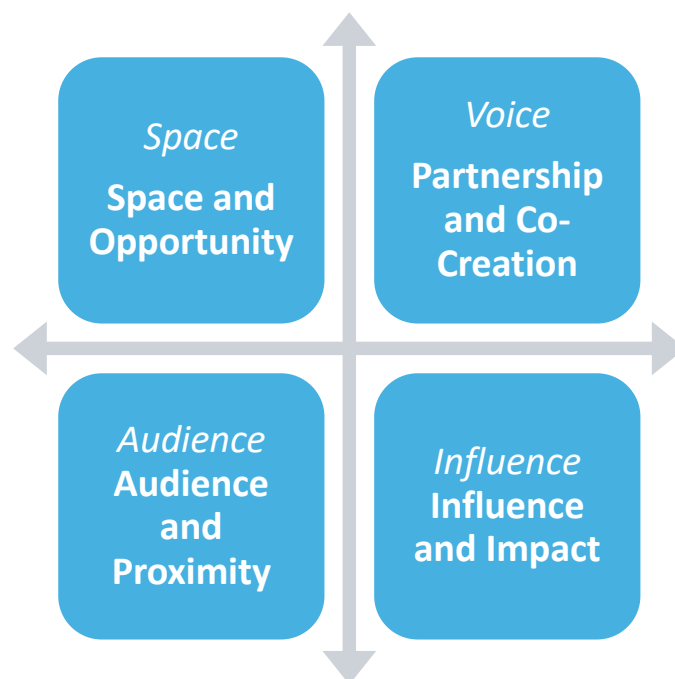

Diagram 1. Drawing on Lundy (2007) to Understand Student Voice

By extrapolating the principles of the Lundy Model to adult learners in Higher Education, there is scope to apply values-led principles relating to social justice and emancipatory approaches that embrace and amplify the views of a diverse student population and encourage participation. We recognise that by drawing on an approach designed for children, we are open to criticism of infantilising students and ignoring the legal rights they are entitled to as adults. However, we argue, the model, rooted in principles of just participation for all people regardless of age, has transferable application.

Considering this alongside a strengths-based approach, synonymous within the disciplinary field of social work and social care, allowed us to focus on principles that reject a deficit framing of student feedback, and focus on listening to views, wishes, feelings and beliefs (Department of Health and Social Care, 2025). A strengths-based approach, that recognises and values the unique contributions and knowledge of people, also enabled us to build in principles of collaboration and self-determination, prioritising relationships (Caiels et al., 2021), and the cultivation of an environment where students can have their say to share their experiences and ideas. This 'asset', the student voice, can enable access to and creation of community, networks, friendships and increased freedom and agency.

Taking a strengths-based approach to education is not a novel application. As noted by Lopez and Louis (2009), universities have a history of applying measurements of strengths such as the Clifton Strengths Assessment (Krutkowski, 2017) to ascertain key educational indicators, including hope, engagement, wellbeing, and other factors that serve as predictors for attendance, academic achievement, and student retention. By applying the broadest principles of strengths-based practice alongside the conditions noted within the Lundy model, we are continuing this tradition in education, mirroring principles of engaged pedagogy (Hooks, 1994) and our disciplinary specific traditions in relation to anti-discriminatory, anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice.

Embracing these perspectives and considerations offers assurances that learners are being listened to, but also that the institution is taking seriously its obligations of the s.149 Public Sector Equality Duty in the Equality Act, 2010 (UK Government, 2010). Attention to this allows us to meet the requirement to consider the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, and victimisation, promote equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between individuals with protected characteristics and those without. It also ensures we advance equality of opportunity by addressing disadvantages and meeting the unique needs of those with protected characteristics, and most relevant to our intentions, encourage their participation in public life and activities where they are underrepresented.

Contextualising our approach to diverse adult learners within strengths-based principles and practices, underpinned by legislation that promotes fairness and inclusion, extends the remit of the Lundy Model to adult learners, highlighting the importance of not only having legislation that promotes rights, but also the need to develop strategies to exercise them.

Matrix of Student Voice Activity

Central to our reframing of the opportunities for 'voice' were the non-negotiable expectations of our sector and institution (e.g. through surveys, student representation and course

committees). However, we expanded upon this to create a wider matrix of activity (see Diagram 2) to offer a structure for academic colleagues and create a range of flexible choices for students to access and engage with, which can be understood in relation to the Lundy quadrants. Despite the multiplicity of opportunity, students were still able to exercise their autonomy in relation to their desired level of engagement. The resulting culture change was the embedding of student voice in everyday practice for the department and a shared philosophy that to be a student in our classrooms means that you matter and have a valued voice.
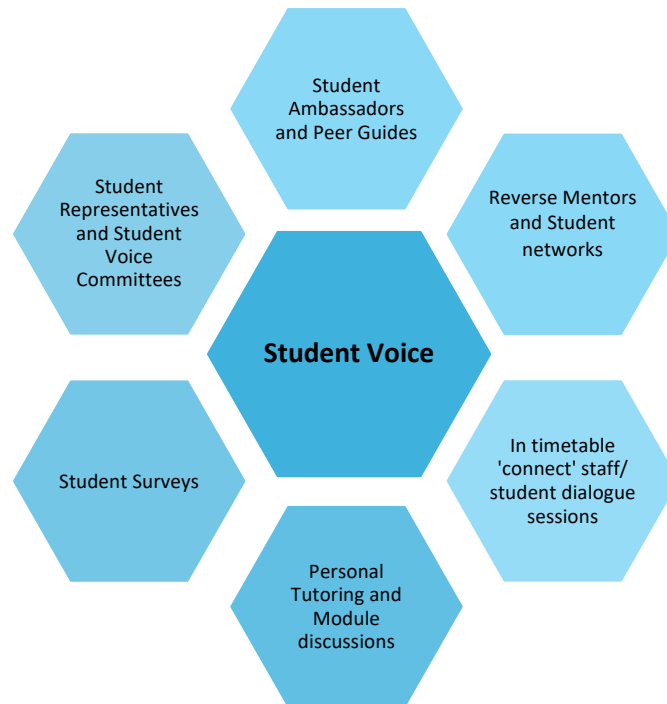

Diagram 2. Student voice matrix

The practical way this was implemented will be considered using the Lundy (2007) quadrants of 'voice' while also recognising the activities often incorporate and intersect across a number of these elements.

Space and Opportunity (Space)

To augment student representative course meetings, we implemented frequent spaces and opportunities for students to meet with academics, including the provision of a designated student common room. To ensure equitable access student voice opportunities were built into timetabled activity, borrowing at least an hour per semester from academic delivery for each cohort. These 'connect' sessions enabled whole group discussion, as well as an opportunity after the session for students to approach staff on a one-to-one basis. In some cases, guests from student services were invited to attend to expand the development of relationships beyond the academic team.

Timetabled, yet informal, peer to peer events organised in the spirit of heutagogy, a learning approach that emphasises self-directed learning (Terigele, 2025), allow students to reflect on their experiences, make decisions about their learning and gain a deeper understanding of

aspects of university life most relevant to them. Timetabling whole cohort events facilitated peer to peer connections between newer and more experienced students, thus enhancing our extended induction model, a function of which includes enhancing students' sense of belonging (Meehan & Howells, 2017).

Online Padlet's were set up on course and module Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) areas to allow students to ask any questions or provide feedback (anonymously), and group tutorials were re-envisioned as spaces to listen to and capture student voices and lived experiences, using open questions and discussions related to their educational experience.

We took a clear stand against the notion that some students are 'hard to reach' and instead utilised the places and spaces students were already located in, either through course requirement or through self-selection, to discuss their experiences, and to enable breadth of participation. Furthermore, student networks created space to listen and respond to marginalised students. Although we have expanded the ways student voices are heard and responded to, we acknowledge that this still favours those who attend more regularly or engage with online forums. We aim to continue explore additional spaces and opportunities that can address this further.

Partnership and Co-Creation (Voice)

Co-production is a model of practice in social care and social work where those who deliver services work with people with experiences of a service, in the review, design and delivery of existing services (Hunter and Ritchie, 2007). Co-creation allows for collaborative stakeholder engagement and participation in the design, innovation and development of solutions and services (Agnello et al., 2025). Students as partners (SaP) is an established and growing approach in the development of teaching and learning in Higher Education, with a recognition of the need for genuine and inclusive partnership (Mathews, 2017) and conceptualised as 'student voice in action' (Matthews & Dollinger 2023). As such, drawing on the expertise and experience of students to complement academic expertise in the development of curricula, student support, and student experience, further aligned with the theory and values that were threaded through the academic teaching and learning in the department.

In the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, and following a student voice conference, the department's Black, Asian and ethnically diverse student network came into being. This network, currently in its third year, is a direct output resulting from listening to and acting on student voice. In accordance with SaP, student involvement upheld the expectation that they would contribute to various aspects of university life, including teaching and learning, alongside teachers and staff. With SaP, the partnership values of shared responsibility, mutual respect, and reciprocity are central, fostering a collaborative environment where both students and staff share responsibilities. This collaboration, framed in pedagogical contexts, leverages students' unique perspectives to enhance learning opportunities, emphasising socially situated learning, and resulted in the cocreation and dissemination of our anti-racist placement resource, which is shared with all social work students and placements, and co-writing and presenting a paper at EuroSoTL 2022 (Rooke & Ngwenya, 2022) detailing the trajectory of our collaboration. This initiative aims to raise student and staff awareness of the ongoing issue of racism in social work placements (Tedam

& Finch, 2025), and enable students and staff alike, to be more confident to report and address any occurrence.

Further evidence of SaP activity in other areas includes a learner-teacher presentation at the university annual learning and teaching conference in 2024 (Rooke & Bagley, 2024), to educate academics and other staff. Subsequently, the students went on to collaborate with the library service to consider how its physical and virtual spaces are experienced by students with neurodiversity.

The development of a Reverse Mentor project enabled us to move into the student partnership arena, and ensured students could be paid for their contribution to department improvement activity. Reverse Mentoring is a flipped mentoring process where students, typically from marginalised backgrounds, mentor, advise and guide senior academic and professional staff (O'Connor et al., 2024). As practitioners and researchers in this field, our practical and theoretical knowledge of co-production and co-creation inspired the decision to implement Reverse Mentorship in our recognition that the 'upper' levels of participation such as partnership and co-design, should routinely be part of our embedded practice as educators as well as social workers and community researchers.

Again, there are challenges around equity in participation and it was necessary to have two rounds of recruitment to the role to ensure the group of Reverse Mentors reflected the range of students and programmes in our department. Ten student Reverse Mentors were recruited in the pilot phase (2023-24) and were asked to provide expertise and insights from their unique and diverse perspectives on subjects including our hidden curriculum and use of jargon, accessibility of learning resources and our assessment and marking descriptions. Reverse Mentors then worked together to produce a presentation on key recommendations to staff and presented this to the whole department, including senior leaders.

Audience and Proximity (Audience)

The visibility and proximity of staff, including those involved in decision making and leadership roles, to listen, learn and be with students, were natural outcomes of providing more opportunities for student discussions and student partnerships. Indeed, by its very nature, co-creation and partnership allows for staff and student to work, learn and create alongside each other in mutually beneficial ways.

In addition, for those who choose not to be engaged in more active participatory activities, students have also been provided with visual guides of department staff to understand who their educational team are, their roles, and clear instructions on how to contact people if they wish to speak to someone or raise concerns. These have taken a cartoon style format, displayed in corridors, and provide more specific information on how staff can help. In this way, accessible, enabling and relational approaches to staff and student contact, amplifies the message that staff are approachable, and will respond to students' queries no matter how small. This is reiterated throughout our communication with the mantra that no question is a silly question.

The use of Instagram to communicate key messages to students and celebrate student and staff success has been an important contribution to enabling staff / student proximity and

ensuring academics are more approachable and visible to students. Personal tutoring was also reframed as an important way of utilising and developing proximity, as well as enhancing opportunities for listening to and responding to students' experiences and insights.

Finally, regular drop-in sessions for students, hosted online and on campus, including evening 'twilight' sessions, created a range of flexible forums for students to share dialogue with staff.

Influence and Impact (Influence)

The regularity and embedded nature of student voice activities developed relationships based on reciprocal communication. This allowed for a continuous closing of feedback loops, with staff being able to highlight changes that had been made in response to student feedback, and students being able to comment on changes. As an iterative process this meant that the developing culture around student voice influenced both staff and students' interactions and contributed to a whole community approach to developing teaching, learning and pastoral support in the department.

While it is difficult to demonstrate causation, and this case study does not claim to be evaluative, this holistic and embedded approach, illustrated by the examples above, has coincided with significant improvements to our key student voice metrics, particularly in the National Student Survey.

In writing this case study, we reflect on the immense pride in the effort, outcomes and positive feedback from the students and staff involved in student voice activities and commit to ensuring the dynamic process is under continual review and evaluation. We aim for students and staff to remain innovative and curious about our effectiveness and impact.

Conclusion

In summary, in utilising the spaces and opportunities outlined above we have been able to move beyond transactional 'You Said, We Did' feedback loops (Young & Jerome, 2020). Through relational, and engaged dialogue (hooks, 1994), and by understanding and communicating student narratives, we are demonstrating how student contributions and insights are continually and directly influencing their collective educational experience.

This reflective account of our educational practice is by no means offered as evidence of the universal effectiveness of this model. We recognise that not all students engaged in the opportunities to participate, and work continues to provide equitable and flexible ways to act on and listen to all student voices. However, drawing on the Lundy model has enabled us to practice what we teach, and foster a culture of inclusion, empowerment and self-advocacy consistent with our disciplinary practice as social workers and community researchers.

In this way we advocate that the theories, values and methods familiar within our academic field are not only useful, but crucial to leverage inclusive Higher Education environments, and we encourage the sector to consider how the disciplines of social work, social care and youth work, can provide an important practical and theoretical contribution to student voice and engagement.

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