

## **Turning down the volume control on student voice in order to enhance student engagement**

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A little while back I found myself laughing out loud at some feedback comments on an American colleague's op ed piece which discussed the over reliance in the US on student evaluations in higher education (Zimmerman 2016). One teacher referred to a student who had commented that a History of Religion course had too much history in it. This prompted other American colleagues to chime in, including a reference to a student who was distracted by the teacher's outfits. Clearly, there is humour and absurdity here and some sadness perhaps if teachers feel under obligation or compulsion to act on these comments for fear of losing their jobs, or being overlooked for promotions. But it would be wrong to conclude from these comments that student power has gone too far. Indeed, once the issues are reconceptualised in a language of students as partners in learning, and with an emphasis on student engagement in scholarly activity, it is much more likely that we would conclude that students should be given more power.

When I first became involved in attempts to enhance student engagement at institutional level (rather than just in my own classroom) I have to admit that some of my motivation was aimed at countering what I perceived (perhaps wrongly) as a UK equivalent of that American student evaluation malaise, as typified by the slogan: 'you said, we did'. I was also a little concerned by how much the term 'student engagement' was dominated by extra-curricular activity and promoting forms of belongingness. Not that there is anything inherently wrong with any of these things, just that they seemed to be crowding out the importance of engagement in academic study itself. And on that subject, like many others, I found myself exploring some of the implications behind the Wilhelm von Humboldt idea that schools were very different institutions from universities because the latter were not there to serve students, but to serve scholarship (von Humboldt, 1810). Or perhaps better, that staff and students should each understand their role in jointly pursuing scholarship, because, whereas schools deal in what we know, universities, and higher education in general, deal in what we don't know.

With some relief I also found that many of the negative connotations I associated with the 'you said, we did' slogan could be substituted by the many positive connotations of the 'student as producer' slogan. And I am hugely indebted to Mike Neary and his colleagues at the University of Lincoln for embarking on an enactment of those connotations; significantly in using it as an antidote to the idea of 'student as consumer'. For, what better way to highlight the full implications of von Humboldt's exhortation than to promote the responsibility that students have not to consume existing knowledge but to contribute to the production of new knowledge?

It is not without significant irony that these types of student engagement corresponded with the idea of 'putting students at the heart of the system' (BIS, 2011). For, what better way could there be to put students at the heart of the system than to exhort them to take joint responsibility for challenging existing knowledge and contribute to the production of new knowledge; to encourage them to see themselves as active participants in building the esteem of the institutions in which they are members (not just customers); and to help them see how they can contribute to active citizenship, community building, and their future employability?

The irony in 'putting students at the heart of the system' was that it turned out to have little to do with students calling themselves to account, and much more to do with affording them the opportunity to call their institutions to account. Thus, a student might say, yes, my lecturers have been good at explaining things to me, but not, yes, I have turned up to some seminars without doing the required reading. There is a further irony here that the first yes in the previous sentence echoes the tone of the UK National Student Survey (NSS), but the second yes echoes the tone of the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Thus, whereas American colleagues may have been very quick to complain about the student voice volume control knob having been turned up to eleven, at least they have a national engagement survey which emphasizes student responsibility in the learning process, rather than their rights as consumers of educational products. And on this front, I hope in years to come that a UK Engagement Survey (UKES) will end up completely replacing the NSS as a much better way to enhance and encourage student engagement, and thereby really put students at the heart of the system.

The recent white paper (BIS, 2016) advances the students at the heart of the system agenda by laying down the groundwork for a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and an Office for Students (OfS). On the former it is difficult to disagree with the proposition that teaching and learning should be subject to a review process similar to research output, except most people do not seem to agree on much beyond that; significantly, on whether (in both exercises) we are actually measuring (or could even) measure what really matters. And if Jo Johnson, the current Minister of State for Universities and Science, is serious about his intention that the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the TEF should operate more in tandem, then we need to become very serious about developing metrics which will be able to measure the impact of research on student learning (including research on teaching and learning itself).

As currently constituted the TEF also seems to throw up some perverse consequences for students. For example, if a student at the end of their third year states that they are highly satisfied with their HE experience and then goes on to get a very highly paid job, they would then also be in a position to ensure that anyone else from their family would have to pay more to go to that same college or university in order to have a similar experience. Not only does that consequence seem perverse but the metrics for measuring quality here are poor proxies for measuring effective learning and teaching. And on

the OfS, as currently proposed at least, we still don't seem ready to trust student groups to represent themselves, thereby creating another form of proxy – that others are still needed to speak on behalf of students' interests.

All that said, the really good news about the UK context is how the work of groups like the British Conference of Undergraduate Research (BCUR) and Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement (RAISE) have significantly helped to raise the profile of undergraduates as fully engaged scholars. Furthermore, there is a significant linked movement in seeing students as change agents, not just sitting on course validation panels, and learning and teaching committees, but actively contributing to curriculum design and the life of the university or college. But there is always more work to be done. One significant area for me has been in the area of HE pedagogy. Writing as someone who has sought to champion a more critical discussion of how subjects are taught in universities and colleges, particularly in the face of some colleagues who are sceptical about the benefits, we still seem to be some way off seeing students as peers in this discussion. There is yet another irony here; that colleagues often complain that students cannot speak authoritatively about pedagogical matters because they lack any knowledge in this field, but this is often said by colleagues who lack this knowledge themselves – or who persist in seeing pedagogy as something which one only needs experience of, rather than research evidence on.

On this front I am hugely encouraged by the number of initiatives which are now offering the chance for students to investigate pedagogical matters, sometimes in collaboration with their teachers. This is surely a good example of what von Humboldt meant by placing oneself in the service of scholarship. But are we ready to see students acting as equals in the peer review of this work – be that the peer review of teaching and learning practices or wider peer review (including journal editorial work, for example)? But also here is surely where we get to the real point about student voice. It's not just about acting on what students demand; it's about joining in a conversation, and all that follows from that. And foremost here is that sometimes we learn more by just listening; sometimes we learn by discussing each other's perspectives; and sometimes we learn by seeking to solve problems together.

If there is a danger in believing that the volume control has been turned up too high on the student voice, one way to deal with that is; for teachers and academics to speak more in a language that helps enact forms of co-joined scholarship with students, seeing them as true partners in learning, and for students to speak and act more on their responsibilities in the learning process, not just their rights as fee payers.

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