OTAGO POLYTECHNIC
Te Kura Matatini ki Otago

Democratising Learning: giving "real" effect to the learner voice.

Presentation to Student Voice Summit, April 2014

What is an effective learner voice?

- A process of dialogue with learners individually and collectively - dialogue which can shape or reshape learning; and a major mechanism for organising learning and teaching in inclusive ways around the needs of learners

- A strong learner voice has direct involvement of learners in negotiating with their teachers to shape the curriculum for particular courses and programmes

- A strong learner voice shapes not only the learning environment but the curriculum itself ie what is learned, how it is learned and how it is assessed.

What is an effective learner voice? (cont)

- A strong learner voice can influence:

  – Learning outcomes

  – Learning content

  – Learning processes, tasks and activities

  – Assessment processes, tasks and events

- A weak learner voice is when learners merely provide feedback, which teachers or administrators may or may not take on board

Learner Voice Ladder of Participation
(After Rudd, Colligan & Naik, 2006, p.11)

Types of participation	Types of involvement	Levels of engagement
Manipulation	Learners directed and not informed; Learners 'Rubberstamp' staff decisions	Non-participation
Decoration	Learners indirectly involved in decisions, not aware of rights or involvement options	
Informing	Learners merely informed of actions & changes, but views not actively sought	
Consultation	Learners fully informed, encouraged to express opinions, but with little or no impact	Tokenism
Placation	Learners consulted & informed & listened to, but no guarantee changes made are wanted	
Partnership	Learners consulted & informed. Outcomes result of negotiations between staff & learners	
Delegated power	Staff inform agendas for action, but learners responsible for initiatives & programs that result	Learner empowerment
Learner control	Learners initiate agendas, responsible for management of issues & change. Power delegated to learners; active in designing education.	

What is needed for a strong learner voice?

- Institutions must genuinely believe they are in the business of learning – facilitating learning; and that

- The learner is a co-participant in the learning process; and therefore

- The learner has the necessary power and influence to make a difference; and

- The learner has the necessary capabilities - skills and knowledge - to express their voice. These will usually need to be developed; and

- The learner is supported to exercise their voice

What is needed for a strong learner voice? (cont)

- Supporting learners to exercise their voice means;

    – Treating them with respect

    – Helping them to take ownership

    – Breaking down barriers that may prevent learners from speaking up and being heard

    – Developing their generic capabilities

When learners are empowered to have a strong voice the learning process has essentially been democratised

Learner voice and learner capability

- Effective tertiary education does much more than develop in our graduates technical or specialist vocational knowledge and skills. At least as important is the development of generic capabilities.
Note strong emphasis on capabilities in TES 2014–2018

- These generic capabilities comprise a range of **personal qualities and attributes** that enable graduates to be effective, and which enable them to perform in their work places and be effective in their communities.

- We better develop learner capability when we empower learners to have a strong and effective voice – when we democratise learning.

The personal attributes of capable people.

- are effective communicators of ideas and information, both verbally and in writing.

- are self aware and self critical. They can take into account their feelings and intuition and reflect on their values.

- are prepared to learn and adapt.

- use initiative. They are self starters and can work independently. They can set achievable and relevant goals.

- listen to and work effectively with others. They can work in teams, respecting and valuing the contributions of others.

- assess the effectiveness of their actions and learn from their experiences. They are reflective.

The personal attributes of capable people (cont).

- are critical of and creative in their thinking and actions. They are open to new ways of thinking and acting.

- have respect and concern for others. They value diversity.

- accept responsibility for their actions. They are willingly accountable for their performance.

All of these capabilities are developed to a greater or lesser extent as learners are engaged with co-planning and co-delivery of their learning, and once developed set learners up as life long learners

Challenges for education providers

- Programmes and courses must provide for explicit opportunities for learners to negotiate on their learning

- This means negotiation around appropriate learning experiences and assessment tasks.

- The teaching and learning culture must support the development of learner capability ie must allow learners to exercise control, to experiment and to take risks

Challenges for providers: examples

- Provide learners with opportunities to be more responsible and accountable for their own learning.

- Provide learners with opportunities to learn with others and in teams. This means setting team goals and objectives, undertaking peer evaluation and being accountable as a team.

- Provide opportunities for self assessment, and ensure a safe environment in which learners can be themselves

- **Our curriculum challenge is to embed such experiences within programmes, not for them to be an added extra or left to chance**

Curriculum for learner voice: some guidelines.

- avoid designing courses which are tightly structured, over-packed with content and over-taught.

- avoid learning being just a set of learning tasks - be concerned with the learning process at least as much as with content.

- have less formal teaching, especially passive didactic strategies, and more learner managed learning, including negotiated contracts of learning and learning in teams.

Don't forget assessment!

What is assessed gets everyone's attention!

- Therefore a key challenge is to provide for the assessment of personal qualities and attributes, as well as of subject knowledge and technical skills

- Not only what is assessed e.g. critical thinking, reflective capacity, team work, goal setting

- But also how assessment takes place e.g. self and peer assessment and team assessment.

- And allow for alternative ways in which learners can provide evidence of learning eg written, oral, visual

Challenges for learners!

- Learners must be prepared to:

  - take an active part in planning and organising their learning,

  - to monitor their own progress against agreed criteria,

  - to provide evidence of achievement against intended outcomes and

  - to do the above individually and collaboratively.

- This will not be easy to achieve with learners who are used to being passive learners ie receiving the wisdom of the teacher

Challenges for teachers!

- Teachers need to:

    - Be skilful in participatory processes

    - create the opportunities for students to plan, organise and evaluate their own learning,

    - shift the emphasis of their personal role from that of content expert to one of guide,

    - to prompt dialogue and critical support and to stimulate reflection on learning processes and progress towards goals.

- Developing teachers to thrive in a co-created curriculum is no easy task, but is worth the effort.

Can vocational learning really be democratized?

"Surely, the vocational competencies/skills we (ITPs) are charged with providing must be taught and transferred to learners in particular ways?"

This is an institutional delivery philosophy and presupposes a unidirectional delivery model. As such it flies in the face of most contemporary constructivist views of learning and teaching.

Whereas crucial to successful learning is an open, collaborative learning environment which engages with the learner voice and which responds to learner needs and aspirations.

Can vocational learning really be democratized? (cont)

At the extreme, learners can design their own programmes of learning, validated by institutional staff for educational integrity:

– Learner determined learning outcomes

– Negotiated graduate profile

– Learner selected content and learning context

– Negotiated assessment criteria and tasks

All programmes and courses can be democratised to a greater or lesser degree: if not what is learned, then certainly how.

All we need is the will!