early stages results in their being able to plan effectively, influence positively, and saves having to 'retrofit' solutions after the fact.

After two iterations of our Programme Enhancement Planning Process and one iteration of our revised process for programme design, validation and review, we have gathered stakeholder feedback and initiated steering groups bringing together voices from module leaders, programme directors, professional service colleagues and University management, to further consider and refine the direction of travel. The feedback is broadly positive, and there is agreement that the direction of travel is right, but, as with every large change, there are a number of areas to further develop and improve. These range from management of data through to use of industry advisors, through to length of forms, through to timing of key milestones, through to more or different KPIs, and so on. Many of these are 'quick wins' which have been changed for the session ahead, and we'll see the outcome of these during the next stakeholder engagement rounds; others are more complex and require further thought and cross-institutional work. In summary, however, many of these go back to the main principle of engagement *vs* impact and the benefit of these process at 'street level'. How can we balance any burden of engagement in quality enhancement activities against the probable output in a way that enhances the experience at 'street level', but also provides the reassurance we need as a public institution? This isn't yet resolved, but we continue to reflect and seek to co-create as we move forward and ask the big questions about why we do what we do.

We dragons in this context continue to try to be powerful champions of positive, compassionate, and meaningful work in tough times and, with any luck, in less tough times too.

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Innovative methods for positive institutional change: The Listening Rooms Project and student and staff 'voice'

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Introduction

Two innovative research methods, developed in a large UK university, have been used to challenge how 'voice' data is collected, analysed, and used. These two stand-alone methods are combined to enable Higher Education (and other) institutions to utilise good listening to embed responsive change built on authentic, genuine participant experiences. The article introduces the Listening Rooms Project, offering a step-by-step guide for practitioners, and, through Nancy Kline's key *Thinking Environment* values, shows how institutional change can be built on and through an appreciative approach. The article concludes that good listening benefits all: for participants, educators and institutions alike.

The Listening Rooms Project

The Listening Rooms Project comprises two individual methods: the Listening Rooms (LR) method, which collects data, and the Round Table Analysis (RTA) method, which analyses the data. Since 2017, the Listening Rooms Project has involved over 300 participants and 100 analysers of data across a wide range of projects (from course redesign through to corporate responses to such demands as the degree-awarding gap), and has become a 'business as usual' research method available to staff and students. Latterly, the approach has been adopted in other HEIs in the UK, charities and local organisations. In 2020, the approach won the Student Experience Guardian University Award.

Method one: Listening Rooms

The steps for the LR method, outlined in more detail in Heron (2020), are based on the need for friendship pairs, safe spaces, and key 'kit'.

1 Friendship

Participants in this method need to be friends/close acquaintances. Finding participants could be through access to an easily identifiable pool (e.g. a course leader will have access to students on their course), or they could be found through a call-out to specific participants (e.g. staff of colour asked across the university to participate). Both routes ask participants to 'find a friend' or 'choose someone you know well'. There is no influence from the researcher on how the pairs are created.

2 Safe spaces

Paired participants are briefed by the researcher on the process and purpose of the research, shown how to use the kit and asked to complete a consent form and demographic profiling (this takes 15 minutes). Participants are told that there are no wrong answers and that they should feel free to let the conversation flow in the way that feels comfortable.

Participants undertake their conversations in a private room where they will be uninterrupted. The researcher ensures the privacy and safety of this space by locating her/himself adjacent to the room in case of potential disturbances from outside or from questions or issues from inside.

At the end of the conversation, participants are asked to complete a short debrief on their views of the method (this lasts five minutes) and they are then free to leave.

3 Kit

LR equipment is straightforward and cheap:

A Digital Voice Recorder (DVR) – The researcher switches the DVR on at the start, then leaves the room, and once the conversation is finished, is responsible for switching off and uploading the audio recording for transcription, ensuring data protection at all times.

Six prompt cards – These are made up of simple words and questions (e.g. 'Belonging' and 'What do I feel I belong to?') and are based on a prior literature search of key issues, debates or themes pertinent to the project area. Participants can choose to talk to these cards in any order they wish.

A 10-minute egg timer – Participants are responsible for the egg timer, turning it over after each card until all six cards have been discussed. The conversation therefore lasts for 60 minutes.

Refreshments – Where the research budget allows, drinks and cake are provided either in the room for when the participants arrive or given afterwards.

Incentives – Where budget allows, research participation is enhanced by offering a financial incentive to each participant to undertake the conversation (applied to student, but not staff, involvement).

Method two: Round Table Analysis

Round Table Analysis (RTA) is a stand-alone approach to the analysis of large-scale qualitative datasets, facilitated by an independent staff member and a group of interested and invested stakeholders. It is important that the facilitator has access to, and familiarity with, all the collected data to provide oversight and challenge. Key to the success of the approach is identifying appropriate stakeholders with the influence to stimulate change. Importantly, this doesn't necessarily mean those in a position of authority. Stakeholders should have a vested interest in the area under investigation, and should have a shared interest in making positive change through whatever mechanisms are available to them. This may include changes to strategy and/or policy, through to simply having informed conversations with friends or colleagues with a view to challenging perceptions. Selecting stakeholders with different skills, experiences and roles is beneficial to the process as it will result in a wider range of views contributing to the data analysis.

Stakeholders should be identified as early as possible to secure their interest in the project and also, logistically, to ensure that all stakeholders can hold time in their diary for the analysis session, which is typically three hours in duration. The number of stakeholders included in an RTA should be proportionate to the amount of data collected, but ideally each stakeholder should have to read no more than, for example, four transcripts of sixty minutes.

1) Once stakeholders have been selected and data have been collected and transcribed, the facilitator should have a first read-through of all transcripts ensuring that data are appropriately anonymised for the analysis session. The facilitator should then allocate transcripts to stakeholders in advance of the session, with the expectation that stakeholders should arrive at the session having read the transcripts.

2) The facilitator should ensure that each transcript has been allocated to at least two stakeholders (not including the facilitator unless absolutely necessary) and that no stakeholder has more than four transcripts to read (less for interviews lasting in excess of ninety minutes or more for interviews lasting less than sixty minutes). This ensures that each transcript (and therefore each research participant) has a 'voice' in the analysis session, but that the preparation time for each stakeholder is minimised (Table 1).

	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10
FACILITATOR	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Stakeholder 1	✓		✓			✓		✓		
Stakeholder 2		✓		✓			✓		✓	
...										

Table 1 Reading Matrix to allocate transcripts to stakeholders

3) The role of the facilitator in the session is to guide and capture the discussion and record evidence to support assertions made during the session. The facilitator should create a live document within which the discussion and the evidence can be captured. At the beginning of the session, the facilitator should invite stakeholders to share initial thoughts on the transcripts that they have read with the rest of the group. Each participant should be given the opportunity to reflect on the themes that emerged strongly from their data, and this should enable the other stakeholders to highlight similarities and differences with their own transcripts. Throughout this discussion, the facilitator should start to note key themes. Towards the end of this discussion, the group should collaboratively decide on the key priorities for the data analysis session and mutually agree upon three to four key themes that have emerged from the data to explore more thoroughly. These themes will form the structure for the remainder of the session with a 15-minute focused discussion session and a 15-minute evidence search session dedicated to each theme.

4) The facilitator will invite stakeholders to spend a few minutes reviewing their transcripts through the lens of the chosen theme and then to discuss the theme using the transcripts as the basis of the discussion. The facilitator will record the group analysis of the theme, capturing sub-themes and guiding the group to reach a consensus about the meaning of the data. During the evidence search session, the group should be invited to find evidence to support the assertions of the group discussion by finding key quotes in the transcripts which support, or sometimes oppose, the group analysis.

5) At the end of the session, the facilitator should summarise the discussion and ask the group to co-create findings and recommendations based on the evidence.

6) This format is repeated for each of the key themes. This action-focused approach ensures that stakeholders leave the table with tangible and agreed actions to stimulate change.

7) The facilitator should be mindful that the session cannot cover the entire analysis of the data and should keep in mind the priorities set by the group at the beginning of the session. Where interesting themes emerge, but do not contribute to the priorities decided by the group, the facilitator should acknowledge the theme and record it for further exploration, but guide the discussion back to the key themes. The live document will capture the findings and recommendations and will then be circulated to the group.

So, both methods have a set process, the key components of which can be seen in Table 2.

	Listening Rooms	*Round Table Analysis*
Participants	Friendship pairs Ideally 10 pairs per project	Anybody with the influence to effect change at any level Facilitator Ideally 6+ around the table (plus facilitator) per dataset
Activity	1-hour conversation based on six key themes	3-hour guided thematic discussion with pre-reading
Equipment	Six prompt cards, digital voice recorder, 10 minute egg timer, consent and debrief forms, refreshments, incentives	Transcripts of LR conversations, wireless mouse and keyboard
Time needed to undertake the method	80 minutes (15-minute briefing prior to the 60-minute conversation followed by 5-minute debriefing)	4+ hours: 3 hours for RTA discussions plus reading time (approximately 1 hour per script)

Table 2 Summary overview of the processes of both methods

Good listening, done well, generates good results

Both methods complement each other because they share important appreciative values. These values reflect the work of Kline (1999) who argues that 'thinking' organisations are those that value people and their experiences; in effect, they matter. In Higher Education, as in almost any sector, ethical as well as strategic and corporate reasons for ensuring people matter are important. In Table 3, we explore how the Listening Rooms project embraces Kline's caring values.

Values (Kline, 1999)	*Listening Rooms*	*Round Table Analysis*
Attention – *'The quality of your attention determines the quality of other people's thinking.' (p. 36)*	By placing participants in a private room, they are encouraged to focus their attention solely on each other and to listen supportively to each other's views and experiences.	Through attentive facilitation stakeholders are encouraged to discuss their views and respect other viewpoints to explore the data.
Equality – *'Knowing that you will have your turn improves the quality of your listening.' (p. 58)*	Removal of the researcher from the room creates an unbiased and balanced discussion between friends.	All transcripts are given equal weight and all RTA stakeholders are given equal voice in the analysis of data, regardless of position, creating democratic output.
Ease – *'Ease creates. Urgency destroys.' (p. 67)*	LRs are a safe space for friends to have guided but relaxed discussions at their leisure.	Reading data is shared between participants to make participation in the RTA as easy as possible. Efforts are made to create a safe environment for discussion.
Appreciation – *'A five-to-one ratio of appreciation to criticism helps people think for themselves.' (p. 62)*	Both methods adopt an Appreciative Inquiry approach to take a strength-based approach to organisational change. Aligning to the work of Watkins *et al.* (2011), LRs choose the positive as the focus of inquiry and explore the experience of participants. RTA encourages stakeholders to locate the themes that emerge from those experiences and use them to create findings and recommendations for positive institutional change.	
Feelings and Encouragement – *'Competition stifles encouragement and limits thinking.' (p. 71)*	By creating a safe environment for friendship pairs, the intention is to enable uninhibited sharing of thoughts and feelings.	By creating an environment where all input is regarded equally, stakeholders are encouraged to bring their own thoughts, feelings and experiences to add value to the analysis.
Diversity – *'Diversity raises the intelligence of groups.' (p. 87)*	The LRs welcome staff and students from all backgrounds. The friendship pairs are self-selecting so even where a protected characteristic is the focus of inquiry, no assumptions are made about the second participant in the room.	Efforts are made to ensure fair representation of our diverse university body, especially when a protected characteristic is the focus. Diverse points of view are welcomed through RTA. Discussion with the aim of reaching a consensus.

Table 3 Kline's Components of a Thinking Environment alongside how the Listening Rooms Project embraces these components

Good listening benefits all: The impact of The Listening Rooms Project

Feedback evidences that through these two methodological approaches, students and staff have felt appreciated, cared for and valued. The following two quotes show how the methods themselves can affect participants in a positive way (irrespective of any change at institutional level). Listening Rooms Project participation, in and of itself, has benefits:

> *'The best thing was reflecting on how much we have all actually grown and improved since starting university in September.'* (LR participant) *'I really value Listening Rooms as a research tool as it supports the authentic views of participants to be heard and is positive and collaborative.'* (RTA participant)

In addition, the approach has clear impact at a strategic level. Stakeholders across a variety of Listening Rooms projects have articulated the benefits of the methods to their organisations in achieving positive educational change:

> *'Listening rooms provides an innovative way to gather rich qualitative data, in addition to providing a powerful change management tool […] providing a*

further perspective on the students' lived experience […] which enhances the quality of our decision making with respect to academic practice.' (RTA participant)

'The methodology creates a holistic view of a student, their journey and deep experiences rather than a series of separate transactional interventions. This has transformed our thinking at the Students' Union. The deeper understanding generated by the approach is one of the reasons why our new strategy is to become a "Listening Organisation", where listening doesn't just happen – it's planned into our structures and culture.' (RTA participant)

Considerations of the two methods

Whilst the two methods have many advantages (each individually proving to be a powerful tool for positive participant involvement and, when combined, collectively allowing for meaningful and impactful institutional change), there are limitations to each.

Listening Rooms

Unlike more conventional qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, there is no opportunity for the researcher to probe participants to 'explain further' or elaborate on answers. Indeed, the researcher only gets to listen to the conversation once it has been transcribed. To counter, the friendship between participants allows conversations to go much deeper and cross boundaries that perhaps a researcher was not able to do. It is important to note here that good ethical practices apply and participants fully consent to their data being used and are signposted to appropriate support in the debrief.

The method allows a participant to choose their own friend to participate and as such we do not assume that their friend necessarily falls into the same cohort bracket that we might be wanting to explore. For example, we do not assume that 'disadvantaged males' or LGBT+ participants have only 'disadvantaged male' or LGBT+ friends and it would, in our view, be false to assert that this is the case (although our experience shows that this does happen but, significantly, it is not for the researcher to make this assumption). It is the friendship bond that matters most here for the LR method. This is not the method to use, therefore, if this variability in friendship characteristics matters. It is worth noting here that where there is variability (for example, a straight friend talking to an LGBT+ friend), the researcher interested in LGBT+ experiences can learn an awful lot from this conversation.

Round Table Analysis

This method of data analysis could be regarded as one that does not exhaust all of the collected data because the RTA discussion will focus on agreed priorities and draw out specific points that are important to the collective group. It is a method, in essence, that draws on the collective agreement from the stakeholders and as such some data may not get used (and the group is fine with that). Some researchers may feel uneasy with this aspect.

The RTA method requires time for reading of transcripts and collective discussion even though transcripts are shared out amongst the stakeholders and the individual load on any one individual is reduced. This is not, therefore, a quick method that can be worked through in a short time period. It is not, also, a method for a researcher who wants to work alone on data analysis. Time spent together immersed in 'voice data' can, on the other hand, be regarded as an equivalent of a team meeting and as such need not necessarily be regarded as extra time. It also has the benefit of allowing a wider range of stakeholders to come together and talk about what is, by definition of them being present, of importance to them.

Bringing a range of stakeholders to the discussion will almost inevitably demand research skills of individuals who are not researchers (their expertise will be in the area under focus, for example, a head teacher's view on 'teaching' or a student rep's view on 'student experience'). This may feel risky to a researcher and does require clear instruction and confidence around explaining ethical processes such as confidentiality. Reading transcripts may feel a challenge for those who do not do this as part of their everyday activity and could run the risk of stakeholders declining the offer to participate (although they almost always get something positive back from the experience). This method, therefore, may be less attractive to those researchers who need a simple data analysis plan with as few potential obstacles as possible.

Conclusion

This article outlines two methods that have been brought together to bring about positive institutional change through friendship, collaboration and immersion in voice. Through listening well to holistic experiences guided by shared appreciative values, we argue that meaningful change can be implemented to enhance educational experiences for students, educators and institutions.

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