Practising Student Voice in University Teaching and Learning: Three Anchoring Principles

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Abstract

In this invited commentary, we offer three principles to anchor understanding of student voice in university teaching and learning. Encompassing related concepts and practices, the principles we offer support a shift in (1) attitude toward, (2) structures for, and (3) goals of teaching and learning. In our introduction, we provide a short history of the concept of student voice and our reason for using the notion of anchoring to argue for embracing its practice. In the main body of our commentary, we share expanded reflections on what each of the three principles might look like in practice, grounded in examples and selected scholarship. We conclude with an invitation to continued dialogue about this work.

Practitioner Notes

1. Student voice is always a relational and humanising practice premised on respect for lived experiences and related understandings.
2. There are many ways to describe and approach student voice, including through engaging students as partners, pedagogical partnership, co-creation, and other forms of collaboration and co-design.
3. Student voice involves thinking differently about the role of students in teaching and learning practices—it provokes teacher reflectivity and re-framing of their role.
4. As an anchoring innovation, student voice maintains a strong focus on student participation in and contribution to learning, teaching, and assessment.
5. A renewed understanding of student voice provides a humanising and relational value proposition for higher education during ongoing disruptions (e.g., generative AI, growing inequality).

Keywords
Student voice, pedagogical partnership, pedagogical praxis, students as partners, co-creation

Introduction

Presence. Participation. Power. These were among the underlying phenomena evoked to define the concept and practice of student voice as it emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s, primarily in K-12 schooling contexts in Australia, Canada, England, and the United States (Cook-Sather, 2006). Understood as a metaphor, not simply reference to literal sound, student voice as a term stood for a movement to democratise schooling (Fielding, 2015), to enact critical pedagogy as defined by Paulo Freire and others (Giroux, 2010), and to reconceptualise student-teacher relationships (Mitra, 2003). In K-12 schooling contexts, student voice theorisations and practices were led by figures such as Jean Rudduck (Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996) and Michael Fielding (2004) in England, Ben Levin (2000) and Jean Courtney (2014) in Canada, Patrick Danaher (1994) and Roger Holdsworth (2000) in Australia, and Dana Mitra (2001) and Michelle Fine (2011) in the United States.

This pioneering work informed efforts in higher education contexts that have come to be known not only as student voice but also as pedagogical partnership, students as partners, student-staff partnership and co-creation. While not exactly interchangeable, all of these terms call for positioning students alongside others with expertise and essential perspectives on educational practice (Cook-Sather, 2002; Matthews, 2017) and have implications for established systems of student representation as well (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). Collections such as *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Student Voice in Higher Education* (Conner, Raaper, Guzmán-Valenzuela, et al., in press) and *Building Courage, Confidence, and Capacity in Learning and Teaching through Student-Faculty Partnership: Stories from across Contexts and Arenas of Practice* (Cook-Sather & Wilson, 2020) offer examples of student activism, student representation and governance, and pedagogical partnership from around the world.

True to its origins in compulsory schooling, student voice in higher education humanises, connects, and mobilises—it is always relational, and it is always working against entrenched hierarchical structures and practices. It is inherently intersubjective—students are students in relation to teachers, and vice-versa—and it is inherently political (Gibson et al., 2022). As politics and policies threaten the progress higher education has made toward equity and inclusion and as advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) outpace ethical frameworks for its use, we believe it is timely to re-consider student voice in our teaching practices. The future of learning and teaching in higher education as a human endeavour depends on learners and teachers embracing relationality, and such an embrace requires clarity regarding how, at this point in time, student voice as an innovation can anchor such an endeavour. As Sluiter (2016) has argued, anchoring occurs when people "can connect what is perceived as new to what they consider familiar," and innovation fails or falters when the "human factor" is

ignored or neglected, most notably when people's perceptions and evaluation of what is old and new are not taken into account (p. 23, p. 21). Student voice as an innovation changes who is involved in developing, enacting, and analysing educational practice (Cook-Sather, 2022a).

We offer three anchoring principles for the innovation of student voice in higher education. Each of these encompasses related concepts and practices, but we offer these three to support a shift in (1) attitude toward, (2) structures for, and (3) goals of teaching and learning. Taken together, these shifts have the potential to humanise higher education, which currently risks dehumanising all its members and perpetuating, and even exacerbating, harm to those from equity-denied groups (de Bie et al., 2021).

Shifting Attitude

Student voice requires that students be taken seriously in everyday pedagogical conversations and interactions. This attitude can be anchored in the familiar practice of gathering feedback from students, but expanding and reframing that practice to position students as dialogue partners rather than consumers or evaluators. This shift in attitude is described by a number of scholars, including McCulloch (2009), who has contended that considering students as co-producers encourages a students-as-partners attitude, Ho (2017), who has noted that a "key shift in attitude can open the way to partnership" (p. 3), and Cook-Sather and Kaur (2022), who have argued for the attitudes of epistemic confidence and open-mindedness toward student capacity and contribution to teaching and learning. Other scholars, such as Schley and Marchetti (2022) in writing about working with students with disabilities in particular, have called for shifting from an accommodation to an inclusion mindset (see also Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023)—a particularly important shift for equity-denied students.

In practice, simple activities can invite students into a discussion about how a class is progressing. For example, a short online poll or Padlet at the end of a workshop or lecture (in larger classes) asking students to name two things that are working and one thing that could be improved invites real-time dialogue about the teaching and learning unfolding in the classroom. The teaching team can apply the key findings to the next class, affirming what is working and discussing issues raised with a plan for change or a rationale for why some things cannot be changed. Some requests or recommendations are very simple, but their implementation can have a profound effect (e.g., a student with a vision impairment might ask that PowerPoint slides be uploaded in PDF format instead of a weblink or a student with a hearing impairment might request that the instructor use a microphone rather than talking loudly). Some requests are outside the instructor's capacity to enact, such as move to a nicer room, but students do not know that, and an explanation from the instructor can inform students while affirming that their voices matter. Still other requests are complex and take time to enact, such as the call for a more diverse representation of scholars and researchers in the class reading list, although such a change can, as one student explains, "contribute to BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] students feeling seen inside of the classroom…[and]…allow for students to have a broader worldview" (Latin, 2022, p. 6). These forms of ongoing dialogue translate attitude into action, which creates a culture of student voice in practice.

When students are taken seriously in everyday pedagogical conversations and interactions, their voices and perspectives inform everything from the classroom environment through activities and assignments to assessments. Counterviews are understood as necessary—there is never just one story—and the richness and complexity of students' lived experiences, learning needs and desires, and insights inform conversations and interactions alongside teacher expertise.

Shifting Structures

Student voice can anchor the innovation of shifting structures that support relationships between the 'student' and the 'teacher' to a partnership within and through which power is shared. This restructuring can be anchored in the familiar fact of students and teachers working together in courses but shifted from a hierarchical, one-way delivery to a dynamic in which teachers and students share not only power but also responsibility for learning.

These structures can be created within individual courses. For instance, for individual assignments or forms of assessment, academics and students co-create criteria and rubrics as well as embrace more student self-assessment (Cook-Sather, 2021; Deeley & Brown, 2014; Matthews & Cook-Sather, 2021). They can be taken up as forms of whole-of-class co-creation for multiple aspects of classroom engagement, including classroom environment, curriculum, and assessment (Bovill, 2020; Cook-Sather, 2022b; Godbold et al., 2022). Reflecting on a whole-of-class assessment negotiation process, co-author and (then) student Sarah Cook wrote:

> *The students-as-partners process left me with feelings of both ownership and accountability. I was very satisfied to have been able to contribute and be a part of the process, but it also meant that I was more committed to the assessment and had a greater understanding of the course expectations. At first, the feeling of responsibility was a little daunting since the onus was entirely on us to completely commit. However, I enjoyed the way the discussions and negotiations fostered positive student-student and student-teacher relationships.* (Monsen et al., 2017, p.6)

When student voice informs the development of guidelines for participation, those students can feel a greater sense of engagement and equity (Cook-Sather, 2022b). The accepted or assumed classroom structures are called into question and then re-shaped through dialogic processes.

Structures can also be developed in ways that position students outside of courses but support what happens within them. When students work as curriculum co-designers and pedagogical consultants, for instance, they collaborate with instructors to co-create content and processes for enrolled students (Cook-Sather & Matthews, 2021). For example, institutions globally have scrambled to advise, guide, and inform students and academics about the use of generative AI tools. Enacting the kind of partnership between students and academics that Tan (2023) recommends in a Singapore context, academics at the University of Sydney (2023) partnered with library staff and 9 students to co-create an open-access, online multi-media resource with the explicit aim to "democratise knowledge and skill of generative AI so that all students everywhere can be equipped with the skills to use this new technology productively and responsibly."

Through a culture of student voice that spans curricular, extra-curricular, and student life programs, structures for co-creation flourish. In each of these cases, the structures support a shift from hierarchy to co-creation in teaching and learning, from teacher as sole expert to, as Freire (1968) argued, both instructor and student as both teacher and learner. In addition to hierarchical structures prevalent in higher education institutions, (then student) Alexander Dwyer (2018) highlighted the structures that implicitly and explicitly prompt competition among students to advocate for an understanding of partnership as a cooperative space. Dwyer, Freire, and many other scholars recognise learner-teacher dialogue as an equalising force that enables structural change through student voice practice.

Shifting Goals

Student voice is an opportunity to question the goals animating teaching and learning practices. The humanising thread of student voice, embodied through learner-teacher dialogue, enables the articulation of shared learning goals and acceptance of different goals within a classroom community. Student voice as a radical pedagogy demands attention to students as people, as full and complex human beings with multiple life projects unfolding alongside their studentship. bell hooks (1994, p. 207) argued for teaching and learning where teachers provide a "space of radical openness" in which students are "truly free to choose—able to learn and grow without limits." The idea of limitless learning and growth hit the metaphorical wall of quality assurance requirements— clearly stated learning objectives aligned with assessment based on a measurable set of criteria keyed to standards (grades). Curricula can be constrained by accreditation and/or standardisation mechanisms (e.g., pre-set learning objectives, assessment lockdown dates). Student voice affords a different frame, one that enables alternative or additional goals to be named (not necessarily listed as assessed learning objectives), one that invites students to consider their goals, beyond or in addition to a grade, and one that is aligned with their values and life worlds beyond campus and courses.

When academics understand the power they have and hold by virtue of being the 'professor,' student voice supports reflectivity and different notions of accountability. Vicki Reitenauer has explained:

> As an instructor in a college classroom, I have an extraordinary amount of power vested in me by my institution. I get to decide what the content of any given course should be … I get to decide how to reward or punish them for how well they perform for me (Cates et al., 2018, p. 38).

Reframing power as accountability to students in classroom practice, Reitenauer initiated an "experience in which I am asking them (students) to choose to participate," inviting their student voice in classroom practice by

- "collaborative development of course content,"
- "collaborative sharing of the facilitation of course activities," and
- "individual goal-setting for learning and self-grading of engagement and achievement" through student research projects (ibid).

Inviting participation that honours students as agents able to shape their own process speaks to student voice as an act of redefining the goals of education. Writing about her experience as a student in Reitenauer's class, Mariah Madigan described a sense of agency that changed her student identity and her relationship to the institution:

> *I became more involved on campus and more engaged in my classes and with professors. I began learning how to get what I needed out of college, rather than producing work that felt meaningless just for a grade* (Cates et al., 2018, p. 41).

Engagement and adaptation, as well as innovation, require agency. When the process of education fosters agency and impact (as opposed to compliance), students develop a sense of responsibility that is more difficult to develop within structures that priortise outcomes over process. For instance, student partner Elena Marcovici (2021) has described developing the confidence "to reaffirm my purpose in my own classes" and "to refocus on how fundamental student learning and experiences are to what college is for." This kind of refocusing—away from a predefined product and toward process—includes a "re-prioritization of learning," choosing not to do some things and to do others in the learning process, according, in Marcovici's (2021) case, to her own sense of what is meaningful and what will best support her in meeting her learning goals.

The kind of agency described above comes from students participating in structures that support student voices not only in their own learning but also in academic development, in which students can be positioned as consultants to academics regarding pedagogical practice. As student consultant Samantha Allard (2021) has argued, "When students are given the opportunity and ability to recognize their voice and the power they have to create actionable change within the classroom, this instills a sense of confidence and agency with a far-reaching impact" (p. 2). These in-class and beyond-class experiences inform one another. A student who worked in partnership with an academic asserted that "being a Student Consultant gave me voice as a person of color when I was not in the role of student consultant," and it did so "by reinforcing that not only did my perspective, assessment skills and commitment to make spaces safer for underrepresented groups deeply matter," they could also "drive important transformation in classrooms and in the student-teacher relationship" (quoted in Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013, pp. 277-278).

These examples of shifting the goal of education from instilling knowledge in students to co-creating it as a process make space for student voice as it guides what is learned and how the learning unfolds.

Conclusion

Student voice is commonly evoked in higher education to describe a range of practices, some meaningful, some token, and some antithetical to the concept's original aspirations. In some ways, the term has lost potency—with overuse (and misuse) and because of different understandings—since its introduction decades ago. Nonetheless, many scholars and practitioners continue to advocate for student involvement, participation, and partnership in shaping teaching practices in higher education. As inequities deepen, student voice is

increasingly intertwined with commitments to social justice, democratic education, and widening participation efforts (Fraser & Usman, 2021; Munevar-Pelton et al., 2022). There is no doubt that "student voice is a powerful tool to gauge the student experience" when students are taken seriously in pedagogical inquiry and research (Ashton-Hay, 2021). But student voice is far more than positioning students as sources of data in our research or survey responses affirming our teaching practices and student experience program effectiveness.

In practice, student voice is relational and dialogic, demanding shifts in attitudes or mindsets to count students amongst those with knowledge and insight to contribute to shaping teaching practices. Student voice that realises the potential we discuss here requires that new structures replace hierarchical and exclusionary structures with teaching and learning practices that nurture and nourish learning communities that prioritise student agency and criticality. The goals of education shift toward the process of learning and the many possible outcomes that arise when attention is turned from narrow outcomes measures to what students (and teachers) gain from attending to creativity and responsiveness. When students historically underrepresented and underserved in higher education systems are engaged as knowers and knowledge-holders, then curricula, pedagogy, and assessment processes become more inclusive and campuses (be they online or physically located) become, in former student partner Ana Colón García's (2017) words, "places of belonging" (p. 5).

It is time to re-consider student voice as an innovation that can anchor the relational in teaching and learning as a human endeavour. The shifts in attitude toward, structures for, and goals of teaching and learning that we outline in this commentary are all both necessary for and supportive of student voice as a dynamic, empowering, and equalising practice. We encourage submissions to this journal—authored by students and/or staff (see Healey et al., 2020)—that elaborate and expand student voice through examples of practice, commentaries, and scholarly inquiry that better capture, and possibly re-define, the journal's theme of student experience.

Conflict of Interest

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Artificial Intelligence

We used AI tools built into Microsoft Word in the writing of this piece. Kelly used Grammarly, which is supported by her institution and integrated into Microsoft tools. Alison did not use any AI in working on this piece beyond what is built into Microsoft Word.

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