

# **Doing student voice work in higher education: an exploration of the value of participatory methods**

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## **Abstract**

This paper will review the existing student voice work in higher education and critique its current weaknesses, particularly in relation to conceptualisations of and commitments to participation, transformation and empowerment. It will be argued that the employment of participatory methods in higher education student voice work, offers a way to address these weaknesses. The potential of participatory methods is illustrated and discussed using two case examples drawn from one higher education institution in the UK. The first case provides an illustration of what is called “transformation of the familiar”, while the second case provides an illustration of empowerment, through recognising the importance of what is not voiced by students, as much as what is voiced. It is concluded that whilst a participatory approach to student voice work in higher education has potential, further work is required in order to evaluate the long term impact of projects that use such methods.

## **Introduction**

In school and college contexts student (or learner) voice is reasonably well understood, being defined as: listening to and valuing the views that students express regarding their learning experiences; communicating student views to people who are in a position to influence change; treating students as equal partners in the evaluation of teaching and learning, thus empowering them to take a more active role in shaping or changing their education (Faux *et al.* 2006; Walker & Logan 2008). This is in stark contrast to student voice work in higher education where definitions and conceptualisations are underdeveloped. This has resulted in a lack of debate and discussion regarding how student voice is understood and enacted in higher education. In this paper I will review the existing student voice work in higher education and critique its current weaknesses, particularly in relation to conceptualisations of and commitments to participation, transformation and empowerment. I will argue that the employment of participatory methods in higher education student voice work, offers a way to address these weaknesses. The potential of participatory methods will then be illustrated and discussed using two case examples.

### **An overview of student voice work in higher education**

What little student voice work that has been done in higher education tends to be reported in conference papers and institutional or project reports. The majority of the work is descriptive rather than evaluative, which perhaps serves to reinforce a picture of an under-developed field. Across the projects there is huge variance in the student voice activity. Some reports focus on student voice at a programme level such as

business studies (Hart and Rush 2007) or medicine (Duffy and O’Neil 2003). Some focus on a specific aspect of the learning experience such as interprofessional learning (O’Neil and Wyness 2005) or professional development planning (Brett *et al.* 2006). Others focus on students from particular groups such as foundation degree students (Hampton and Blythman 2006); mature students (Dinsdale 2002) or Chinese postgraduates (Turner 2006).

The two most commonly cited purposes of student voice projects in higher education are quality enhancement and assurance (e.g. Shah and Nair 2006; Williams and Cappuccino-Ansfield 2007) and staff or professional development (e.g. Dinsdale, 2002; Duffy and O’Neil 2003; Campbell *et al.* 2007). This is different to the schools and colleges student voice literature where the dominant discourse is of governance, representation and rights (see for example Fielding 2001, 2004). These two broad purposes of student voice work in higher education tend to be aligned to higher education policy or practice agendas such as evaluation and feedback: (e.g. Symons 2006b; General Social Care Council 2007; Briscoe *et al.* 2008) and reflective practice (e.g. Jamie *et al.* 2002; Turner 2006). In addition there is also a strong student engagement or involvement agenda (e.g. Quality Assurance Agency 2005; Scott 2006; Campbell *et al.* 2007)

Implicit in the feedback and reflective practice agendas is the assumption that student feedback will have a transformative impact on teaching practices and curriculum development; that change is an inevitable consequence of student feedback, because teachers learn something new or unfamiliar that challenges previous practices.

However, the fact that some student voice researchers such as Harvey (2001) and

Shah and Nair (2006) challenge what they see as unquestioned assumptions in higher education that student feedback will actually lead to actions or improvement reveals the potential tensions that can be produced when expectations of transformation are not explicitly articulated and combined with rich descriptions of how transformation is actually enacted in response to student voice.

Implicit in the student engagement agenda is an assumption that students will become more engaged if they are able to participate in key decisions about the context and content of their learning (Bergan 2003). Despite this, the student voice in higher education literature does not really expand on its conceptualisation of participation. This failure to unpack participation as a concept in the context of student voice means several significant opportunities are missed. For example, the opportunity to challenge how policy agendas might be used to hi-jack student voice agendas. In the school sector for example, Osler (2008) expresses concern that Schools are using citizenship education in a way that encourages compliance rather than participation in democratic processes or governance. This raises an important issue in relation to the perceived purposes of student voice work in higher education. For Osler, a significant aspect of learner voice is challenging mechanisms of power, in recognition that the power relationships between learner and teacher are not equal.

In higher education, the student voice literature is relatively silent on the issue of power relationships between teachers and students and therefore little consideration is given to issues such as equality and empowerment. Hampton and Blythman (2006) are relatively unique in their attempt to link their student voice work to the ideas of Paulo Freire and conceptualisations of power and oppression. They argue that: “it is

important to give voice to the experience of the least powerful". Hampton and Blythman make their comments in the context of widening participation, academic failure, retention and student support mechanisms where linking Freires' (1990) notion of oppression to students who are at risk of being excluded from educational opportunities appears both obvious and meaningful. However, there is perhaps scope, for student voice work to be used much more explicitly to examine other less obvious ways in which students in higher education may feel oppressed. For example, in the context of academic writing, Read, Francis & Robson (2001) argue that differences in the possession of academic knowledge reflect part of an academic culture where social inequalities are reflected and reproduced.

The lack of clarity regarding the commitment of higher education student voice projects to transformation, participation and empowerment is further reflected in the way student voice is defined and the roles assigned to students.

### **Definitions of student voice in higher education**

Implicit in much of the student voice work that has been reviewed for this paper is the belief that the student voice is powerful and that student voice work involves harnessing that power (Dalglish et al. 2006; Symons 2006a). Student voice projects in higher education vary however, in the extent to which they explicitly define or conceptualise student voice or student voice work. For example, apart from the inclusion of the phrase "student voice" in the title of their articles, neither Turner (2006) nor Scott (2006) make explicit reference to the concept of student voice within the text of their articles. For McAuley (2003) student voice work simply means

including small excerpts of quotes from students in reports of evaluation work and labelling these quotes “the learner voice”. For those that do refer to student voice in more detail, the majority of the focus is on scoping the activities that teachers engage in when undertaking student voice work. Student voice work therefore is seen as involving some or all of the following meta-cognitive activities:

- Asking questions about student experiences;
- Seeing and understanding the student perspective;
- Reflecting on implications for practice;
- Hearing or listening to previously inaudible or ignored voices

In a discussion article, Parsell (2000) defines student voice work as asking questions to which we want to know the answers. This definition is reflected in the explanation given by King and Evans (2007:88) for their student voice work which involved staff and students working together as peers in staff development events: “We wanted to get away from making assumptions about students and actually ask them directly”.

Campbell (2007) and Campbell *et al.* (2007) both cite a quote from Paul Ramsden (1998:353) in which he refers to good teaching as “seeing learning through the learner’s eyes”. The reference to seeing or sight, is implicitly linked to notions of understanding the student perspective (Poole, 2008) or providing insights into the nature of students learning experiences (Campbell *et al.* 2007).

Verill (2007: 79) argues that student voice should be “the motor that drives reflective staff development”. This conceptualisation of student voice work as using the student

voice to encourage staff to reflect on and consider the implications for their practice underpinned all eight projects (of which Verills' is one) reported by Campbell *et al.* (2007). Jamie *et al.* (2002, 2003) also position their work as providing a catalyst for the adoption of reflective practices. Describing their use of a student advocate to collect the views of other students and feed them back to the lecturer they suggest that using advocates removes potential barriers to engaging in reflective practice.

Dinsdale (2002) positions her work on understanding student experiences of transition as enabling voices that have been previously been unheard to be heard. Echoing this argument, O'Neil & Wyness (2005) suggest that the concept of voice refers to the perspectives of a stakeholder group that have not been sufficiently included in a discourse. They argue that student voices have been "barely audible" in the evaluations of interprofessional education. Campbell (2007: 4) defines student voice work as about hearing what students say and using what they say to make improvements.

Across all of these slightly different definitions of student voice work, there is an implicit emphasis on taking on board and valuing student views. However, there is no strong articulation of beliefs concerning whether or not student voice work in higher education involves transformation or empowerment. In the case of transformation this can be exemplified by an apparent lack of consensus regarding whether or not an explicit distinction needs to be made between hearing and listening. Some authors such as Porter (2008) and Hampton & Blythman (2006) make a point of linking listening to action. In doing so they echo a distinction that is made more explicit by Lundy (2007: 936) when she argues that giving what children say, 'due weight'

involves listening rather than hearing. This conceptualisation of student voice is not reflected however, across the whole of student voice activity in higher education.

The relative silence regarding student empowerment in these definitions is significant in terms of thinking about whether higher education is only interested in a particular kind or dimension of student voice: a voice that expresses views but doesn't necessarily demand equality or empowerment, in other words a voice that does not impel action. The descriptions of meta-cognitive activities involved in student voice work therefore allude to, but do not address in any meaningful way, what Gilligan (1993) called the "intensely relational act" of speaking and listening.

### **The perceived role of students in student voice work in higher education**

It is rather telling that the explicit definitions of student voice work are teacher-centric in terms of emphasising just the activities that teachers will undertake (asking, seeing, hearing, or reflecting). Student voice work in higher education may therefore be at risk of setting teachers apart from students in a way that brings into question the nature of the dialogue between teacher and students that student voice work facilitates. Freire (1990) for example, argues that dialogue between teacher and student requires humility on the part of the teacher in that they should not see themselves as a "case apart" from the students.

Further insight into the potential dialogue between teachers and students that student voice work in higher education might facilitate can be inferred through an

examination of the roles that are ascribed to students. A review of the literature reveals five main roles that are assumed for students:

- Student as stakeholder or representative (O’Neil and Wyness 2005; General Social Care Council 2007; Shah and Nair 2006; Williams and Cappuccino-Ansfield 2007);
- Student as consumer or customer (LeBlanc and Nguyen 1999; Verill 2007; Hart and Rush 2007);
- Student as teacher or facilitator (Campbell et al. 2007; Duffy and O’Neil 2003; Beasley, 2007);
- Student as evaluator or informant (Dinsdale 2002; Jamie *et al.* 2003; O’Neil & Wyness 2005; Campbell *et al.* 2007)
- Student as story-teller (Blyth and Hampton 2005; Campbell *et al.* 2007).

These different roles raise interesting questions about the nature of the relationship between students and teachers. For example, those projects that position students as teachers or facilitators give an impression that students are able to get much “closer” to staff (physically and metaphorically) and influence them in ways that perhaps other roles don’t allow. One of the eight projects described by Campbell et al. (2007) for example involved staff attending an accredited programme for supervisors of Masters dissertations being joined in the final session by research students. The purpose of the session was to enable supervisors to hear first-hand and in a non-threatening environment how students react to supervision at various stages.

Not all student voice projects however, give a detailed rationale for the roles assigned to students which means that there is a lack of critique around the potentially problematic nature of some of the roles students are assigned. For example, there is evidence that treating students as evaluators or informants can result in a rather one-way relationship between staff and students, reminiscent of what Briscoe *et al.* (2008:10 ) describe as the practice of “you said, we did” style campaign. The work of Dinsdale (2002) is a case in point. Describing her motivations for conducting a student voice project she explains that she came from a community education background where a “continual dialogue” with students informed curriculum development and delivery. She describes how she therefore conducted focus groups with mature students in order to find out about their experience of making the transition to higher education and to feed the information into institutional networks and committees. However, when she talks about bringing together interested parties to discuss the issues raised, there is no explicit mention of students. The dialogue produced therefore, appears to be between Dinsdale and the institution, rather than students and staff. This has significant implications for the way that concepts such as empowerment and transformation are understood. For example, although Dinsdale talks of how her student voice project empowered students who participated in the focus groups, she defines empowerment as the setting up of self-help groups, suggesting that she is equating student empowerment with independence from the institution rather than effecting change or transformation of the institution, which perhaps only serves to reinforce the notion of an uneasy relationship between staff and students.

## **What is missing in higher education based student voice work?**

The review of student voice work in higher education reveals implicit conceptualisations of voice as involving transformation, participation and empowerment, which tend to be poorly developed leading to an unclear picture of how these concepts might be enacted through student voice work. If student voice work in higher education is to progress and deliver the meaningful transformation, participation and empowerment that it appears to aspire to, a framework is needed that offers a way to link aspirations to implementation. In this paper, I will argue that participatory methods have the potential to do this; to link the theory to the practice.

## **The potential of participatory methods in higher education based student voice work**

Descriptions of participatory research methods are frequently accompanied by the identifying label of “Nothing about me, without me” (Nightingale, 2006). They are used with a range of participants including children (e.g. Hill, 1997) and older people (e.g. Ross *et al.* 2005). They are also commonly used in disability studies research, particularly learning disability research. At the heart of participatory research is the principle that it is research *with* rather than *on* people (Reason and Heron, 1986).

Participants are encouraged to own the outcome of the research by setting the goals and sharing in decisions about processes (Everitt *et al.* 1992). Participatory research attempts to engage participants in the whole research process from design through to evaluation. There is a particular emphasis on participants identifying the research problems and questions to ensure that they consider the research “worthy of

investigation” (Chappell, 2000). Participatory research emphasises collaborative partnerships, but goes beyond this to emphasise non-hierarchical relationships (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995) where researcher and participant have equal status and power.

The identification of the potential value of participatory methods in higher education student voice work is strengthened by a similar call made by Fielding (2004) in relation to school based student voice work. Conceptualising student voice work as empowerment (through the countering of oppression) and transformation, Fielding (2004) argues for a new methodological approach in schools that is based on what he calls “the dialogic alternative”: speaking with rather than for students. Fielding outlines the conditions or criteria for dialogic research as: collaborative agenda setting; appropriate methods of collecting data; debate about overall research design; production and analysis of collective research knowledge and enhancement of the group to solve problems. Fielding (2001) also distinguishes between students as data sources, students as active respondents, students as co-researchers and students as researchers and argues that student voice work needs to move towards treating students as **co-researchers or researchers**.

The underlying principles of participatory research are closely aligned to the concepts of participation, transformation and empowerment that are expressed in student voice projects as well as to the conditions of dialogic research set out by Fielding (See Table 1). This strong alignment between voice and participation is further acknowledged in the writings of participatory research proponents such as Swain and

French (1998:40) who talk of how voice “bridges the individual and the collective” in terms of reflecting both story-telling and decision-making.

<Table 1 about here>

### **Filling the gap: Exemplars of adopting participatory research methods in higher education-based student voice work**

In order to illustrate the potential of participatory research methods in higher education based student voice work this next section **describes the methods and presents results** from two projects, PAIRS and LEXDIS, which were conducted between 2007 and 2008. Both projects were conducted within the University of Southampton. Formal ethical approval for both projects was obtained through the School of Education Ethics Committee at the University of Southampton. Key ethical issues that were addressed in the projects included processes for gaining access to the students, ensuring informed consent; clarifying and respecting students wishes regarding anonymity and assuring confidentiality of information collected (see Seale, 2008; Seale, Draffan and Wald 2008 a, b for fuller project reports including details of ethical procedures followed).

**The presentation of results from the two projects will attempt to illustrate the extent to which participatory methods have the potential to facilitate both transformation and empowerment as well as promote a different kind of relationship between teachers and students. In particular, it will be suggested that the PAIRS project provides an illustration of what will be described as “transformation of the familiar”, whilst the**

LEXDIS project provides an illustration of empowerment, through recognising the importance of what was *not* voiced by students.

## **PAIRS (Participatory Approaches to Inclusion Related Staff Development)**

The PAIRS project was conducted within a context of an increasing recognition of the importance of developing inclusive learning and teaching at the University of Southampton and the need to involve students (particularly disabled students) in the design and delivery of staff development materials and activities (Seale, 2006). The main aims of the PAIRS project therefore, were to: 1) capture “student voices” regarding their learning experiences within one School at the University of Southampton and use these “voices” to explore whether and how educational programmes include or exclude students with a wide range of learning needs from experiencing positive or high quality learning opportunities 2) involve students in the analysis and exploration of these “student voices” and develop a collaborative partnership whereby students help to develop materials and methods that can be used to help staff in the work towards meeting learning needs and reducing barriers to inclusion.

In order to address the first aim of the project twenty students were recruited into the first phase of the PAIRS project, which involved recounting their learning experiences, with a particular emphasis on whether or not their learning needs had been met. A variety of methods were used to recruit students including asking programme directors to disseminate information about the project to their students; posting

information about the projects to student email lists and course Virtual Learning Environments and giving presentations about the project in lectures. Students who chose to participate in the project, were given the opportunity to choose one of the following methods to tell their stories:

- Write or audio-record a one-two page letter to an “imaginary” friend who has similar learning needs to them and is thinking of enrolling on the same course;
- Write a diary describing their learning experiences on their course, over the period of a “typical” week;
- Write a reflective journal that describes a “critical incident” that was really positive or negative in terms of their learning experience;
- Produce a piece of creative writing or art (e.g. poem, picture, sculpture, song) that expresses their feelings and experiences in relation to the quality of their learning experience;
- Be interviewed face-to-face, by phone or by webcam by the project leader.

The most popular method(s) that participants chose to relay their experiences was the letter to a friend and a face-to-face interview. Five participants were male and fifteen were female. They represented the broad range of programmes run within the School (three foundation degree students; two undergraduates; five PGCE trainees; three postgraduate taught students and seven postgraduate research students). The learning background and needs of these 20 participants were varied (one declared a disability; four had family or caring commitments; five entered university from traditional routes, six entered from non-traditional routes; three were international students and nine studied part-time).

In order to address the second aim of the project: involving students in the analysis and exploration of “student voices”, five participants were recruited to phase two of the project. Two students were part-time students, two were full-time and one had since graduated from the university. The original intention was to convene one or two focus groups where all phase two participants **would meet with the project leader** to discuss the twenty examples obtained in phase one. The nature of the group however, made this difficult to achieve. Therefore, after a period of consultation with the group a way of working via email was agreed, **where each participant (including the project leader) was given between three and five examples from phase one** and invited to identify key themes (as many or as few as they liked) that they thought were central or important in terms of understanding the positive or negative learning experiences of the student concerned. The examples were sent to participants as word documents via email and participants were given the option of using the insert/comment or format/shade options within the word processing application to highlight text extracts that would best illustrate the themes they had identified. When all the participants had submitted their analysis of the themes contained within their examples, the project leader collated all the themes and sent an email summary back to all the participants, seeking final approval.

The findings of the project were distributed to all staff within the School. The report has also been published on the University Teaching and Learning website. Materials from the report, including the case studies have been used in both School and university staff development seminars and workshops. In addition, the materials are used within the University Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice, that all new

lecturers at the University are required to undertake. Participants in the project have also been involved in dissemination in that they have co-presented at conferences and set up a post-project wiki with a view to encouraging others to respond to the findings and share their own experiences.

### **An illustration of a transformation of the familiar**

The results from the student analysis of the data fell into two broad categories: Factors that helped student learning and factors that hindered learning. Four major factors emerged as helping learning: supportive tutors; knowledgeable and expert tutors; flexibility; sharing and communicating with peers. Four major factors emerged as hindering learning: workload issues; lack of information; poor communication; issues around essay writing skills (See Seale 2008 for more details).

When these results were formally fed-back to Programme Directors, the response was initially disappointing in that several indicated that the identified issues were not a surprise to them as they had been highlighted through other more standard student feedback methods. However, less formal follow-up work involving small staff development workshops revealed a different more encouraging response. When given the time to engage with the rich, detailed and complete stories contributed by participants and to discuss with colleagues and reflect, teachers began to indicate that the stories were quite powerful for them, because they revealed not only the factors that were important to students, but the impact that these factors had on their academic and personal lives. For example, when reading about the positive impact of

supportive tutors, teachers commented on how they had learnt that the seemingly little things (such as smiling) can have a large impact:

Participant Three, PGCE student: For me this has to be the part of the course that I will remember and be most thankful for because had I not had the meeting with the tutor then I would certainly have left the University and would not have a career that I love now and a new job in September to look forward to. The academic side of the course was also excellent but I will always remember the help that I was given when I was experiencing probably the worst period in my life so far.

Participant Nineteen, Postgraduate Research student: Most of the teachers are very friendly except for some that never smile and say at least “hello”. However, for me the most important thing is that you have a sense of “one for all and all for one”. I like this so much. It is nothing like the professors from my old university. From my point of view they did not try to help us evolve and learn. They were just doing their work and nothing else. Here the things are totally different. You can feel that they care about your progress, they care about your problems and of course they are continuously trying to make things better.

When reading about the negative impact of work load issues, staff commented on how they frequently ignored or took for granted the wider “life contexts” that student inhabited:

Participant Four, Foundation Degree student: There have been times on this course when I have wondered if I am doing the right thing; I have felt pressured for time and I have realised that I only spend passing time with the people whom I love and care for because of the amount of time that study requires. My weekly timetable has had

many faces throughout the course as I have at times balanced a full-time job, a part-time job and a part-time foundation degree.

Participant Fifteen, Postgraduate Research student: Get home and I'm thinking- 'can I do this?' It's SO unlike me, horrible feeling. I can't see the wood for the trees and I've got revision sessions for my AS and A2 students tomorrow. Dear oh dear. And then there's the assignment. That's right, the one I was so looking forward to formulating and writing. I have a good grade standard to maintain as well and don't want to dip at all. And on top of this, I have 2 weeks+ of AS exam marking ahead, starting next week. This will be an extra 2-3 hours work a day, intense concentration. My brain is bulging at the seams through workload and lifeload.

The stories produced by the PAIRS participatory method not only revealed the impact that certain factors had on students, but it revealed to teachers the histories and backgrounds that students were bringing with them when trying to deal with the impact of these factors. The stories put the "voices" into a very real and sometimes painful life context for staff. This was very powerful in terms of transforming their perceptions of how influential their practices can be on the lives of students. Two particular examples were participant five, a Masters student, and participant fourteen, a PhD student. During her interview, participant five shared how she had been labelled a failure at school and how this had influenced her desire to improve her prospects through education:

I left school with my teachers telling me that they would be surprised if I ever got a job. So I do lack in confidence, and I do need people telling me that I'm doing OK. Both of the [...] course tutors said that they thought I was more than capable of doing the course, so I decided to apply. But doing a Masters had always been in the back of

my mind. I always regret never having stayed on at school and doing a degree, but I found that when I finished the BA, I still wasn't satisfied. I feel like that with my Masters now, I don't feel I've done well enough and I've got to continue. It's this personal ambition; I guess I want to show those teachers that they were wrong.

Knowing this about participant five, may enable her teachers to respond in a more informed and committed way to her stated anxieties about essay writing:

When I started the BA, it was a huge step from doing the Cert Ed. I feel like I could have done with some help with study skills before studying with the units-some useful advice and tips on reading and note-taking, structuring essays. I was getting very frustrated with myself at the beginning of the BA, because I was getting lower grades than I knew I was capable of and I couldn't get my head around the writing and what was expected of me.

Participant fourteen, an international postgraduate research student, contributed a four page reflective journal to the project in which she shared her anxieties regarding reading and writing in English and how this influenced her confidence in her ability to express her academic voice:

I call my "getting stuck" moment that phase in which I totally blocked my ability to both read and write. It was a profoundly frustrating moment when I felt like I was wasting time – mine and my supervisor's. I was extremely anxious with my inability to get out of that situation. [...] My self-confidence is still suffering the effects of that, but I am gradually rebuilding my identity and finding where my strength is. As an extension of that "getting stuck" I felt a need to be authorised to think and express my thoughts in English. Furthermore, to be legitimated to contribute to a context that I

don't belong to and that don't belong to me. [...] In this situation as in all other difficulties, my supervisor played an essential role. In this particular case she freed me of my fear to be an alien, a non-legitimated voice. [...] The practical result was a couple of texts that I wrote, shared with my supervisor through my online journal and received meaningful and emancipating feedback. That was my voice finally emerging.

Knowing how the supervisor in this case had a powerful yet positive influence on the sense of alienation and legitimation that participant fourteen felt may enable other supervisors to respond in a more informed way to other international students who are struggling, through language, with voice.

The participatory methods used in the PAIRS project enabled students to choose what issues they wanted to talk about that were important to them, through a medium of their choice, and in doing so revealed to teachers the stories of their students' lives. The stories, revealed through the participatory methods, therefore appeared to offer a richness and authenticity that was conducive to the kind of "authentic listening" described by Fielding and Ruddick (2004). The authenticity of both voice and listening may also have facilitated what Batchelor (2008:6) called a "transformation of the familiar" and Fielding (2004: 296) called a "rupture of the ordinary". Rather than stop at what was already well-known (e.g. issues relating to work-load, supportive tutors etc), the teachers were enabled, through the voices conveyed within the 20 detailed narratives, to look at the experiences of students differently, through a process of sieving, filtering and "worrying away at what is utterly familiar" (Batchelor 2008: 6). In doing so, they have potentially avoided the dangers warned of by Gilligan (1993: xiii) when she talks of "hearing something new, but then quickly

assimilating it into the old categories of thinking so that the novelty and message is lost”.

Accepting and responding to the emotional impact of students learning experience, may lead to criticisms of student voice work in relation to fears of being overly subjective. However, the words of Paulo Freire (1990: 80) might be quite apt here, in terms of giving guidance about dealing with facts (what is) in the context of feelings (what is becoming):

“The investigator who in the name of scientific objectivity transforms the organic into something inorganic- what is becoming into what is- fears change”

### **LEXDIS (Disabled Learners Experiences of E-Learning)**

The overarching aim of the Joint Information Systems Committee funded LEXDIS project was to explore the e-learning experiences of disabled learners within the University of Southampton in order to increase understanding of the many complex issues and interactions introduced by disabled learners’ requirements for accessible e-learning, compatible assistive technologies and effective learning support.

Recognising that disabled students are not a homogenous group, students with a wide range of disabilities and experiences of using e-learning and assistive technologies, were included in the study in order to:

- Explore and describe how disabled learners experience and participate in learning in technology-rich environments;
- Investigate the strategies, beliefs and intentions of disabled learners who are effective in learning in technology-rich environments and identity factors that enable or inhibit effective e-learning;
- Make recommendations for those involved in designing learning systems and developing support services for disabled students.

In addition to adopting the definitions of participatory research outlined in Table 1, the LEXDIS project team chose to align its methods to a participatory framework outlined by Radermacher (2006) and identified the approach as: “researcher-initiated, shared decisions with participants” where the researchers have the initial idea for the research, but participants are involved in every step of the planning and implementation. There were three key phases of participation. In the first phase of the study participants were consulted, using an online survey, regarding the relevance of the proposed research questions and the appropriateness of proposed data collection methods. In the second phase of the study participants contributed their own experiences of using e-learning through an interview and the provision of additional information (e.g. artefact) in a form and media of their choosing. In the third phase of the study participants were invited to advise on the analysis of the experiences obtained through phase two and what key implications needed to be drawn out from them. They were also involved in the design and content of the project website and offered opportunities to contribute to the dissemination of the project.

A range of recruitment strategies were adopted in the LEXDIS project that reflected both the sensitivities of recruiting disabled students and the practicalities of trying to ensure participants with a wide range of abilities and experiences were given an opportunity to participate (See Seale, Draffan & Wald 2008b for a detailed description). In phase one, key advocates for disabled students, the Learning Differences Centre and the Disability Support Service agreed to send an email about the project to students registered on their database and also gave permission for project posters to be displayed in their service areas. Participants who took part in phase one, were also given an opportunity to volunteer to participate in phases two and three. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were also used to recruit additional participants into these later phases.

Quantitative data from the phase one online survey were collected and analysed using Excel. In the phase two interviews, an Olympus recorder was used to record the interviews. The resulting audio files were transcribed and imported into NVIVO for coding. The overarching coding framework reflected the focus of the project research questions and concentrated on: descriptions of and feelings about technology use; past learning environments and experiences; learning and strategy choices; sources and nature of technology related support. In the phase three focus group, the discussion was recorded and transcribed, but not coded, instead the transcription was used to identify quotes that supported or differed from the general findings of the interviews.

In phase one 56 students participated. In phase two, 31 students participated: 17 female and 14 male participants. The disabilities of the group were varied, with some declaring more than one disability, but the most commonly declared disability was

dyslexia (n=14). The majority of participants were aged 20 or under. In phase three 15 students took part in the focus groups and advised on the initial website design and four students helped to design and program various elements of the website.

The information provided by the students has been integrated into a website designed for staff to help them develop their practices in relation to provision of technology enhanced learning for disabled students. The website includes a searchable database where practitioners can search for tips on what strategies and alternative technologies students use as well as guidance on best practice. Everything contained within the database is linked back to the thirty case studies provided by participants, which means that the student voice is heavily weaved into all aspects of this online tool for staff.

### **An illustration of empowerment**

A major finding of the LEXDIS project, drawn from analysis of the interview data, was that the participants were 'digitally agile', They were well-informed about the strengths and weaknesses of particular technologies, confident about their technology use and had developed a range of sophisticated and tailored strategies for using technology to support their learning. This finding was significant in terms of reflecting a model of empowerment proposed by Hunter-Carsch and Herrington (2001) which emphasises what disabled students can do as opposed to what they cannot do and encourages teachers to acknowledge the strengths and abilities that disabled students can bring to their studies. This issue of how disabled students are perceived and portrayed was one that the LEXDIS project team found themselves addressing

throughout the whole of the project, particularly in relation to how comfortable participants were being labelled as disabled.

The team were acutely aware that many students reject the label “disabled” as assigned to them by higher education assessment (e.g. dyslexia screening) and benefit systems (e.g. DSA) because they do not consider themselves to be disabled, or because disability is not an integral part of their self-identity. Furthermore, disabled learners are often wary of disclosing their disability for fear of stigmatisation or being disadvantaged in some way (Tinklin & Hall 1999). These concerns are perhaps reflected in some of the comments that participants made in the focus group:

I've had some people claim that dyslexia is just a made up thing and I was like OK, someone who doesn't have any idea what it is like to have dyslexia, you just can't say that[...] I'm not pretending to be dyslexic just so that I can get a laptop.

My condition is that I am vulnerable to stress and I don't feel that I have a disability, I just feel that I have problems dealing with things as easily as I used to.

The participatory methods used in the project meant that the project team were in a continuous contact with students throughout all the phases of the project. This contact provided a framework for managing tensions around labelling and recognising that the voice that students wanted to express was primarily that of a learner, rather than the voice of a disabled person. This meant that in all interactions with participants, particularly in the phase two interviews and the phase three collation of case studies, the team were careful not to put words into the mouths of the participants and instead left space and opportunity for participants to refer to themselves as disabled, if they

wished to. This meant that only 9 of the 30 participants explicitly referred to themselves as disabled in the interviews. Furthermore, in the participant authored case studies only twelve referred to their disability “label” and three of those were in such an oblique way that it was almost unnoticeable. What participants preferred to do was to describe functional difficulties related to the tasks undertaken and the technologies being used and to share the strategies they employed to deal with this:

I am currently in my 2<sup>nd</sup> year of a Biomedical Sciences degree. [...] I have difficulties when presented with new technology and little time in which to learn and utilise it. Sometimes it feels new technology prevents the effective learning of material. [...] we have to have many images in our assignments and it is often easier to draw them and present items on paper but there are times when we have to present word processed work and then I go into Google Images to find examples of proteins or other molecules. I use the reference that can usually be found at the bottom of the picture or the web page. (LEXDIS participant, case study extract)

The sensitivity around labelling and a desire to be “true” to the participant voices led to a key decision being made regarding project dissemination. On the project website and linked database of student strategies the team were careful not to organise the case studies or strategies around disability labels. The project has therefore not dwelt on exploring deficits or deficiencies, but has tried to emphasise learner needs. As one focus group participant said:

The important thing is understanding what people’s needs are [...] whatever your disability or learning problem is; there is probably something that can help you.

The use of participatory methods in all stages of the LEXDIS project contributed to the development of a trusting relationship between project staff and students which obliged the project staff to continually reflect on how they reported and represented student voice and the extent to which they wished to distance themselves from the common practice of presenting results relating to disabled people in a form similar to a medical or social work “case record”, which can be argued to not only privilege information on the basis of its usefulness to professionals; in this case Higher Education personnel, (Gillman *et al.* 1997) but to ride rough-shod over student voice in a way that is potentially disempowering.

Freire (1990) argued that to be denied the opportunity to speak is to be oppressed and de-humanized. Equally, to be denied the opportunity to challenge the way other people speak about you, can be oppressing and de-humanizing. Fielding (2004) argues that student voice work involves working for the construction of dialogic encounters which allow for the possibility that the oppressed will produce a narrative or image of themselves that contradicts common perceptions. The students who participated in the LEXDIS project may not have explicitly described themselves as oppressed but appear to have valued the opportunity to challenge the standard ways in which disabled students are perceived and presented in higher education.

## **Reflections on what participation means to students in the context of empowerment**

In this paper I have argued that student voice projects that adopt participatory methods have an increased potential to empower students. In the two case studies of participatory methods presented in this paper, an obvious or direct way in which the potential for empowerment was facilitated was through the level of control and choice that students were able to exert, for example:

- Choosing the medium through which their voice and experience was shared (PAIRS and LEXDIS);
- Controlling, through editing and validation processes, the content and presentation of their interview transcripts and case studies (PAIRS and LEXDIS);
- Controlling the extent to which they were identified with the label ‘disabled’ (LEXDIS);
- Exerting an influence over the analysis and interpretation of their experiences (PAIRS);
- Exerting an influence over the presentation and dissemination of their experiences (LEXDIS).

A significant consequence of enabling students to exert such control and choice in the two highlighted projects is that the resulting stories or descriptions of student experience had a power and authenticity that teachers responded to. This is important

in the context of empowerment in that it could increase the likelihood of student voices compelling teachers into action.

While participatory student voice projects may have a direct impact on teachers and the way they respond to students, it is also worth exploring in more detail the impact that such projects have on students. It would therefore be appropriate to consider in more detail what motivated students to participate and what participation in the PAIRS and LEXDIS projects meant to them. In the LEXDIS project, some participants indicated that they valued the opportunity to participate because they hoped they would personally learn something (usually about assistive technologies or e-learning) that would enhance their own studies:

[...] it was another outlet for training, because I haven't had my training for software and it was an opportunity to practice what I had learnt [...] a good opportunity to get my training in and also to reinforce what I had learnt [...] The research has helped me learn more about how I need to access things and how to use technology.

A small handful of LEXDIS participants were so enthused about the focus of the project (e-learning) that they have expressed an interest in pursuing postgraduate research in similar areas. One participant has taken up an internship with a view to pursuing a PhD that seeks to develop a rubric for accessibility and usability checks. One participant has developed an interest in accessibility and HCI to the extent that she hopes to take an MSc in the subject. Another participant has developed an interest in producing software to solve issues around colour for those who have deficiencies of this nature and hopes to pursue a PhD in the field of accessibility and technology.

The idea that participants in student voice projects might be empowered by what they learn through participation is further reflected in the PAIRS project. For a small handful of PAIRS participants, their motivation for taking part appeared to have been a curiosity about the methods of project and wanting to learn from the way it was done:

Although my schedule is quite busy as you know, I am really interested in taking part of the second phase. It is the kind of experiences and skills that I want to have. I did not come here just to get a PhD and then go back. I want to be involved in any research or courses that might help to improve my educational and research skills. It is my pleasure to help you in this project. It opens my mind to many things that may help to improve the organization that I will return to, when I finish my PhD.

One participant, in a joint presentation about the project, shared her frustrations that students who were not English native speakers were frequently deemed ineligible to participate in other university based research projects. She was frustrated at being excluded from contributing to research, but also from learning from the experience of being a research participant. It is this frustration that motivated her to participate in the PAIRS project.

The idea that students may be empowered by what they learn about through participation in student voice project suggests an additional interpretation of notion of empowerment through students taking an active role in changing or shaping their education. As well as potentially influencing the way in which courses are delivered in the future for future students, participants in the two illustrated projects appeared to

value and take advantage of the opportunity that participation in the projects gave them to advance or shape their own immediate learning or study agendas.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper a review of student voice work in higher education has revealed an underdeveloped conceptualisation of voice, particularly in relation to transformation, participation and empowerment. This has led to a lack of detailed description or discussion regarding how these concepts might be enacted through student voice work. A participatory approach to conducting student voice work in higher education has been proposed in response to these concerns. Evidence drawn from the two illustrations of this participatory approach suggests that this approach has the potential to **both empower students and** increase the possibility that teachers will respond to student voices. The relatively short-term nature of these example projects (twelve to eighteen months), suggests that future student voice work could be usefully conducted over a longer period of time in order to more fully evaluate the magnitude and longevity of any changes that may result from participatory student voice projects.

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