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Editorial: Student Voice. Listening to students to improve education through digital technologies

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Editorial: Student Voice. Listening to students to improve education through digital technologies

This special issue explores the synergy between student voice and digital technologies as a space for student voice and participation. Both fields boast an established tradition of research, although in pursuit of largely separate research agendas. There is now a need for in-depth analysis of the role digital technologies play in creating a space for student voice and on how the two research fields could be fruitfully intertwined.

Over the past twenty years, the student voice pedagogical movement has been gaining momentum worldwide (Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011). Inspired by the need to enhance student engagement and participation in education (Cook-Sather, 2002), the movement seeks to bolster the position and role of students inside school and other academic contexts. In this light, students' views on teaching and learning represent valuable input, informing the actions of teachers and policymakers alike (Fielding, 2001). The movement's initial efforts were mostly focused on capturing the perspectives of school children and young students and on fostering their co-participation in teaching and learning practices (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). More recently, major changes in higher education have resulted in the legitimisation of student voice at university level too (Cook-Sather, Bovil, & Felten, 2014). The student voice is now seen as a central component in the transformation of higher education and its alignment with students' experience and expectations. It also contributes towards students' experience and expectations as learners, and career aspirations as future contributors to the economy and society.

Digital technologies have been disrupting traditional models of teaching and have paved the way to new pedagogical practices. Improvements in Internet connectivity in recent years have greatly enhanced students' and young people's participation in digital spaces (Buckingham & Martin-Rodriguez, 2013). Indeed, new digital media are offering young people increasing opportunities to undertake participative roles, with positive implications for the development of capabilities (empowerment) related to the "participatory culture" (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2009). At the same time, digital technologies like social media and social networking sites have been progressively adopted as technology-enhanced learning environment in formal settings of learning (Manca & Ranieri, 2016).

These innovations have resulted in the redefinition of students' roles and a shift in the conceptualisation of student participation and engagement. While there is still no general consensus on how these two concepts should be interpreted or implemented, issues regarding Student Engagement, Student Participation, Youth-Adult Partnership and Youth Activism are gaining increasing interest among researchers and practitioners, alongside the early concepts of Pupil and Student Voice (Cook-Sather, 2014).

Taken as a whole, these concepts are inspiring the development of a wider range of initiatives and practices in different contexts. These can be grouped within three related but distinct research strands.

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3 The first is tied to early research devoted to listening to students' voice to improve teaching
4 and learning practices at school (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004) and in higher education. Within
5 this perspective, students' "unique" points of view regarding what takes place in classrooms
6 and lecture halls is acknowledged. Students are encouraged to provide suggestions and
7 constructive considerations on teaching practice (Rudduck, 1999).
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10 The second strand concerns the Deweyan roots of student voice and the idea that education
11 fosters democracy and citizenship. In this perspective, schools and universities are conceived
12 as laboratories of democracy and civic engagement where all members of the community
13 make joint efforts for the common good by sharing power and responsibilities (Fielding,
14 2012).
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17 The third strand relates to the research methodologies used to foster and sustain students'
18 involvement in participatory and engaged practices. This entails rethinking the roles and
19 patterns of participation of the different actors involved and investigating how those roles can
20 be effectively sustained by means of appropriate methodological approaches and the
21 development of relevant skills (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, & Bottrell, 2015). Fielding's
22 (2001) typologies of partnership that identify a continuum of student involvement in research
23 activity, with students as "co-researchers" and "researchers", fall also under this strand.
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27 The purpose of this special issue is to promote reflection on the potential that digital
28 technologies offer for legitimising students' voices and acknowledging them as valid,
29 informed viewpoints in learning communities and as agencies for improving educational
30 quality. The call for papers attracted over one hundred submissions and the refereeing
31 process was long and demanding. The nine papers selected for the special issue represent a
32 synthesis of relevant and timely issues concerning the different student voice strands. They
33 offer a comprehensive overview of research being conducted through a wide range of
34 conceptual approaches and with the use of technological tools for learning and teaching in a
35 variety of educational settings. "Student voice" is used as an umbrella term to refer to
36 different forms and levels of voice, participation and engagement of students in educational
37 contexts.
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42 The authors also offer different perspectives on what counts as student voice, as well as
43 whose student voice counts - and for what purpose. Research has focused, for instance, on
44 student voice for engagement and participation, enhancement of experiences and provision,
45 relationship building and democratisation, among other areas. What all of these have in
46 common is the notion of student voice as a form of added value, insofar as it can be
47 conceptualised as a core ingredient for the creation of knowledge and as a lever for positive
48 educational change.
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52 A relevant point in this special issue refers to the educational contexts of the studies reported
53 in the articles. The majority have been carried out in higher education, while a few report
54 research conducted in secondary schools. Since the student voice pedagogic movement was
55 born in the school context (Flutter, 2013), the increasing interest of student engagement and
56 involvement in higher education has resulted in a growing number of research studies in this
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3 context. However, in this special issue this may not be surprising, in so far as the journal is
4 mostly popular among higher education scholars that are used to documenting and
5 disseminating learning experiences more than teachers and practitioners in school contexts.
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8 As far as the technological tools are concerned, overall the studies rely on a plethora of
9 technologies to improve student voice and participation, ranging from tools for collecting
10 students' feedback to online platforms, to social media and collaborative tools. Digital
11 technologies are exploited to achieve purposes aimed at collecting students' viewpoints, at
12 enabling dialogue between the different agents involved, or as a means of innovation in the
13 different learning settings, with the use of video tools as significantly important in many of
14 the studies.
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18 In terms of geographical distribution, while student voice research is traditionally popular in
19 English-speaking countries like the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and the United
20 States, the articles included in this special issue originate from a wider range of locations.
21 This diversity evidences an increasing interest in student engagement and participation in
22 areas including Finland, Italy, South Africa and Hong Kong.
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25 Considering the three distinct research strands cited above, the majority of the articles fall
26 into the first category, aimed at improving school and higher education through listening to
27 students.
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30 In "Feedback methods for student voice in the digital age" Di Zou and James Lambert
31 address the issue of how technology can support student voice by providing opportunities for
32 feedback and self-reflection. The authors present findings from a study comparing traditional
33 oral and pen-and-paper feedback with the use of digital alternatives (Socrative, TodaysMeet
34 and Google Drive). Results show that students had a positive attitude towards digital methods
35 since they allowed for anonymity, for choice of when to comment and the freedom to use
36 their own words. The technology was, however, also distracting and therefore the authors
37 suggest that a variety of methods should be employed depending on the circumstances.
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41 Writing "Using video technology to enable student voice in assessment feedback" Fabienne
42 Van der Kleij, Lenore Adie and Joy Cumming go forward into the research field on feedback
43 as a tool that has a great impact on learning. By exploring the use of iPad video technology to
44 facilitate feedback and self-reflection, by interviewing nine six-year students-teachers' pairs
45 in an Australian private school, the authors captured the individual perspectives of both
46 teachers and students of the value of specific instances in the feedback conversation. They
47 demonstrated that the use of iPad video technology to record feedback sessions, and teacher
48 and student use of these as a stimulus for reflection, is one way to give students a voice in
49 feedback practices. Furthermore, they illustrated the different degrees of student voice and
50 the complex nature of feedback interactions.
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55 In "Orchestrating 21st century learning in higher education: A perspective on student voice",
56 Raija Hämäläinen, Carita Kiili and Blaine E. Smith focus on the role of technology as a
57 mediating tool enhancing student voice and participation. Located in a Finnish University,
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3 the design-based study aimed to make students actors in developing pedagogy fit for the 21st
4 century by enabling them to design and apply technology in a specially designed module. The
5 findings show that the use of technology lowered the barriers in communication between the
6 lecturer and the students, enabled the students to take responsibility for their learning and
7 supported a collaborative learning environment.
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10 In “Using student voice to examine teacher practices at a cyber-charter high school”, Jered
11 Borup and Mark A. Stevens deal with the problem of identifying better teaching practices in
12 American cyber schools where students experience higher attrition rates and lower academic
13 results than similar students in face to face educational contexts. In front of a rapid growth of
14 K12 full time online programs, existing few studies rely heavily on the opinion of content
15 experts and ignore students’ voices. Evidence from ten interviews with teenage students
16 showed that they look for and need to learn with teachers who nurture caring relationships,
17 monitor and motivate their engagement, design and organize engaging learning activities, and
18 provide personalized instruction.
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22 In her paper “Students as collaborators in creating meaningful learning experiences in
23 technology-enhanced classrooms: An engaged scholarship approach”, Liezel Nel employs a
24 participatory scholarship approach to student-instructor collaboration aimed at improving
25 pedagogical practices that lead to meaningful technology-enhanced learning experiences. The
26 design-for-partnership approach advocates co-development of learning, a step beyond asking
27 students for feedback and treating them as mere data sources. On the contrary, the study
28 points out how collaboration between instructors and students has contributed to the
29 transformation of the author’s pedagogical practices.
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33 The notion of staff-student partnerships for enhancement and reflection is further explored by
34 Alison Cook-Sather in “Virtual forms, actual effects: how amplifying student voice through
35 digital media promotes reflective practice and positions students as pedagogical partners to
36 prospective high school and practicing college teachers”. She focuses on the “amplification”
37 of the student voice through digital media, reporting on pedagogical partnerships between
38 students from different contexts and levels, prospective high school teachers and college
39 staff. The research reports on three technologies: email, virtual mapping and a platform for
40 the publication of collaborative work. The author concludes that the meaningful integration
41 of these digital tools is conducive to quality learning experiences, evidenced through rich
42 exchanges that demonstrate deep learning and engagement. The amplification of the student
43 voice via those tools encourages a partnership approach to learning and teaching.
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49 The papers included in the second strand focus on participatory and democratic practices at
50 school and in higher education. In their “Engaging students in school participatory practice
51 through Facebook: The story of a failure”, using Facebook as a platform to gather and nurture
52 the views of secondary school students on school quality and policy proved a challenge for
53 Stefania Manca and Valentina Grion, to the extent that the project ended in failure. Students
54 did not engage in the proposed activities for a variety of reasons, including mistrust and the
55 contamination of their “Facebook personae” with school-related matters. The authors make a
56 number of suggestions and recommendations regarding future school-based student voice
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3 projects aimed at supporting civic engagement and democratic participation at school.
4 Among them, the careful consideration of power relations, transparency, inclusion and the
5 role of teachers are keys, as is digital fluency and practice.
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8 In “Silence, voice, and ‘other languages’: Digital storytelling as a site for resistance and
9 restoration in a South African higher education classroom”, Kristian D. Stewart and Eunice
10 Ivala analyse a digital storytelling experience conducted in a dissertation project whose aim
11 was to provide a liberating classroom space where students could redefine their identity
12 outside of publicly shared representations. The study explores the role of voice in a safe
13 space where students can encounter historical, political or culturally inscribed silences
14 through a digital writing process, contributing a more nuanced and ethical dimension to the
15 notion of anonymity and participation.
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19 Finally, the third strand looks into the role of students in the research process. Although the
20 notion of the student voice has become better established in recent years across different
21 educational contexts around the world, evidence is still needed to enable students to be
22 considered informed members of educational research communities.
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25 In “Evaluating a blended degree program through the use of the NSSE framework”, Norman
26 Vaughan and David Cloutier evaluate a blended learning approach at programme level
27 against the Canadian National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) benchmarks. The
28 study is based on a staff-student partnership, with data collected at the end of the first and
29 fourth years of study. The findings suggest that a purposeful blend of technologies, both
30 synchronous (such as web conferencing) and asynchronous (including social media and
31 Google applications) can have a positive effect on the learning experience. For example, the
32 pedagogically sound incorporation of such tools can enable active collaborative learning and
33 open up opportunities for peer mentoring. It can also strengthen the links between theory and
34 practice. The authors conclude that a digital road map can significantly contribute to the
35 enhancement of the experiences of campus-based students.
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