



By: Laura Zinghini

EMPOWERING STUDENT VOICE AND AGENCY

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Everybody needs to feel heard. Whether it be an employee that makes a positive suggestion, a singer who belts out a ballad in front of an audience or a coach who gives their players a strategy before a game. When we are heard we feel valued, empowered and included. The students sitting in our classrooms right now need to have a voice within the classroom and outside of it, so that we can enhance their learning experiences and empower them to build confidence, knowledge and purpose. If we support them to have a voice, and we work collaboratively with them, we can demonstrate to them that we value them. We empower them to manage their learning in a meaningful way.

‘When students meaningfully participate in decision making about their learning, they are more likely to remain involved in education and to achieve better results’ (Victorian Student Representative Council, 2017).

While it is our role as educators to deliver curriculum, students need to be engaged in order for them to get the benefits. So often, we take personal responsibility for their achievements and for their disengagements. We might say things such as:

- ‘She achieved an excellent result, it’s because of the extra effort I put into that lesson.’
- ‘He just did not want to do anything in class today because it’s last period on a Friday.’
- ‘This class is so much more engaged than my other class’.

Imagine how different it would sound if students were able to take responsibility for their own achievements and disengagements, and put into words the things that were affecting them in and out of the classroom:

- ‘I achieved an excellent result because when I wasn’t sure about the topic, I clarified it until I understood.’
- ‘I am having issues outside of school and I just couldn’t concentrate in class today.’
- ‘The other class is allowed to choose their groups and the tasks and I work better with my friends.’

Establishing a learning environment that promotes student voice

Students are growing up in an increasingly technological society, and the need for them to understand how to use their voice in a meaningful way is crucial for their future. As teachers, it is our responsibility to provide students meaningful opportunities to develop their own voices and use them effectively. The paramount concept is consistency, because that in turns leads the students to a precise and effective way of communicating. It is important that we establish respectful and safe learning environments where students can share their thoughts, feelings and opinions. This can take shape in many different ways.

I like to begin by establishing a basis of trust. I use icebreakers to get to know my students and to invite them to get to know me. These can take many forms and can be done in pairs or as a group. Whole group icebreakers, in particular, can help the class to trust and understand each other. Student voice starts to emerge when students feel comfortable sharing a part of themselves with others. Respectful listening and turn taking all help to create an environment where students feel safe to challenge each other, able to contribute and confident that their voices will be heard.

Another strategy that I utilise is guided discussion. By asking guided questions and encouraging students to discuss the task; they can share their opinions and ideas with each other and give constructive feedback to one another. This assists my teaching practice as once we have established firm boundaries around the learning environment, students feel empowered to have a voice.

Student voice inside the classroom: making learning decisions

Once you have established a safe and nurturing learning environment, you can further encourage the expression of student voice within the classroom by involving your students in curriculum planning, implementation, and negotiating learning goals. This does not mean that you are getting them to lesson plan or write reports, of course! It does mean that once you know your students you will understand their cultural backgrounds, needs and interests and can create tasks that give them choice and agency. One of the ways that I foster this is to create Project Based Learning tasks. These can be in a group or as an individual learner. The priority is to get students to focus their learning of a concept by choosing an appropriate task. For example, you might use a grid with marks allocated based on the type of task, incorporate written and oral tasks, and give your students a choice of which type of task they might wish to complete. This allows them to choose tasks that suit their way of learning and still meet the necessary assessment guidelines outlined by the curriculum and your school. This aligns with *Practice Principle 3, Action 3.2 – Teachers co-design opportunities for students to exercise authentic agency in their own learning* (DET, 2018b). I have provided an example below of the type of grid that has been used in an English classroom.

'To Kill a Mockingbird'

Literary Task Grid

| | | | | |
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| Artistic representation of the film – either a DVD cover or movie poster. (15 pts) | Your Choice! Create a task that demonstrates knowledge of the text in some way (Negotiate Points!) | Table of Contents (make sure you include all of the work in it) Structure this like the table of contents documents (sample given in class) (5 pts) | The 'To Kill a Mockingbird' film questions. (40 pts) | A summary of the movie that doesn't give away the entire plot. It should encourage people to see the movie. Minimum length – ½ page. (15 pts) |
| A 6 – 8 sentence paragraph describing EACH of the main characters. Consider personality traits. Total length, 3 paragraphs minimum. (15 pts) | Your Choice! Create a task that demonstrates knowledge of the text in some way (Negotiate Points!) | A diary entry from the point of view of Scout or Jem telling about the trial. One page minimum. (20 pts) | Choose a song that reflects the themes depicted in 'To Kill a Mockingbird' and write out the lyrics to it. After writing the lyrics, write a 4 – 6 sentence paragraph explaining why the song reflects this theme and what the theme is. Clean lyrics only. (20 pts) | Racism and Prejudice Questions (15pts) |

I have also implemented student voice by allowing the flow of the class to dictate how learning tasks are created. For example, if I have been teaching a concept and the class has participated in discussions and sharing of ideas with each other, it is possible that the students may discuss the concept in a way that I had not anticipated. This gives you a pathway to engage them further in their learning by expanding on their ideas and creating learning tasks in conjunction with them. It is also good professional practice as it aligns specifically with *Practice Principle 3, Action 3.1 – Teachers empower students to have a democratic voice in the running of the communities in which they learn* (DET, 2018b).

At my school, each learning area has a strategic focus on two of the [High Impact Teaching Strategies](#) each term (DET, 2017). My current focus is on Collaborative Learning and Feedback, which align with the concept of student voice in the classroom. I have been working on modelling collaborative skills in which students are taking on responsibilities within a group setting with explicit roles. They are then responsible for ensuring outcomes and deadlines are met. It is important that each student has an individual responsibility. If more than one student takes on the same role, they can become complacent and let others take over, thus losing their own voice. For example, in a Year 9 Drama class, I have utilised this model when the students were creating performances. The students had learnt about a specific performance style and in a small ensemble group had to create a performance using elements of this style. In each group students took on the following roles: Director, Costume Designer, Lighting Designer, Sound Designer and Script Writer. Each group had to determine who would take on each role, and the responsibilities of that role, to create their performance. At the start of each rehearsal lesson, each group would spend time feeding back to their group and myself where they were as individuals in their role. This proved to be hugely successful as each student had agency and decision around their role, whilst working collaboratively with their group. These performances were thoroughly enjoyable to watch, both on the stage and through the creation process.

With Feedback, my strategies are centered more around the individual student. The students receive individual feedback that is presented one on one, in written form and verbally. This is a process that takes place over a few lessons. With the constraints of a secondary timetable I can usually only provide detailed and personalised feedback to 5-7 students per lesson.

Exit cards are another feedback tool I use to assist with student voice. At the end of each lesson, students complete a ticket that asks, 'what did you learn today?' with the set expectation that they are detailed, especially concerning whether they met the learning intentions and success criteria. This helps students track their own progress and is also a great way to affirm that we have accomplished something together in the lesson!

Student voice outside the classroom: our school experience

Within my school, we utilise *Amplify* (DET, 2018a) a guide to assist the implementation of student voice in the school community. *Amplify* aims to 'empower students through voice, agency and leadership' (DET, 2018a, p. 6) and states that 'students are empowered when they are supported to develop their knowledge, skills and dispositions in these three areas, and when schools have a deliberate, planned and coherent approach to embedding voice, agency and leadership as part of a positive climate for learning (DET, 2018a, p. 6).

To create these opportunities, we must listen to our students, As a collective, the staff at my school decided to do just that. Utilising the data from the 'attitudes to school survey' (DET, 2019) as well as internal data collection, we discovered that the connectedness of our students around student voice was high when it came to staff relationships but low when it came to their beliefs around opportunities for student leadership. We had the student representative council and student ambassadors at each year level, but the students did not feel that they were really being given the opportunity to develop their skills as leaders. As a school, we decided to abandon our student leadership model, and utilising *Amplify*, work with the students around what they felt they needed.

It is important for schools to provide opportunities for students to exercise agency outside of the classroom. This in turn builds school pride and connectedness in students and demonstrates to them that their voice is meaningful. Always remember that the learning environment extends beyond the classroom. All schools should have programs in place that encourage student voice, such as student leaders or ambassadors. It is important to adopt a growth mindset and to explore pathways to these programs, with the possibility for new and exciting ways for them to become empowered.

Student Voice Council

Our new Student Voice council is a team of dedicated students, across year levels, who are elected to the council. In order to become representatives, they must go through a process to be elected. This process was designed by the students, with staff assistance. First, they write an application, addressing key selection criteria about why they would like to be on the council, and why they would be a good leader. The reasoning behind this process is that it empowers the students to reflect on their leadership

abilities. They must then prepare and present speeches to their peers and the staff. Finally, they are interviewed by a panel of staff members, where they outline their individual aspirations for the council.

From this, we have four college captains and four junior captains; they become Student Voice leaders. They also become representatives on the panel, with the staff, for the other candidates to become Student Voice ambassadors. The captains are responsible for chairing all meetings, taking minutes and reporting to their designated year levels and the wider school community. They are present at staff meetings, school council meetings, and in the case of specific captains such as the Arts or Sports Captains, domain meetings. At these meetings, they report to staff and parents the workings of Student Voice and work with the school community to make real change. For example, as Head of Arts I work closely with the Arts captain to create new opportunities for performance, purchase new equipment that is necessary and mentor them through public speaking engagements such as presenting concert and awards nights. They are allocated a specific amount of time during our Arts meetings to present and this is a position in which students thrive. It gives them an opportunity to represent their peers, and to put forward exciting new opportunities.

The Student Voice council have their own designated office within the grounds of the school. This is a permanent space, which has a conference table for their meetings, a computer and a photocopier. This was an important part of the discussion around valuing student voice, as the students felt they needed a place for them to congregate. This gives the students a sense of ownership, and we want to place emphasis on the value that the school holds in their opinions and decisions as a council. Wherever possible, students are encouraged to be actively involved in the decision-making process in the development of classroom and whole school expectations and values. This includes school policies and procedures, as well as daily organisation. Some of the decisions influenced by the student voice council have included:

- the implementation of a school celebration day
- fundraisers for charities and school beautification projects
- holding seminars with local community groups and businesses
- representing the school at Anzac services.

The Student Voice council also have their own internal student newsletter to keep the student body informed of upcoming events and future plans.

The most important part of having such a high functioning student voice council is that at any point in time if something is not working, the students are empowered to discuss and change where necessary. In order for this to be successful, staff need to be supportive of this endeavour, and gently ensure that they do not become a council of student ideas and no action. If our data and *Amplify* has taught my colleagues and myself anything, it is that if students are not able to be part of the process, and accomplish real change, then they do not feel like they have agency within the learning environment.

A key takeaway

As educators, we walk out of our classrooms with a sense of achievement when students can communicate a concept we have taught. It is a wonderful feeling to think that we have been listened to, and we have changed our students in a way that they will potentially remember later on in life. It is important to remember that students enjoy this feeling also. They need to feel like their opinions, ideas and feelings matter to ensure they are engaged and empowered.

Make sure you download [Amplify](#) and learn more about student voice.

Discussion with your mentor

Questions you might raise with your mentor include:

- What are the ways students can be involved in giving and receiving feedback?
- In what ways could they contribute to the design of learning tasks?
- What do you do to encourage a culture of valuing student voice in your classrooms?

Further Reading

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