Personalising learning – 2

Student voice and assessment for learning

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This publication
Audience
Teachers and leaders at all levels in education.

Aim
To show how student voice and assessment for learning put the student at the centre of change, and enable the student to be active in learning.

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Introduction

How to use this pamphlet

The pamphlet reports on the discussions and presentations at the Specialist Schools Trust and Secondary Heads Association conferences in London (1 and 12 October 2004) and, in the case of student voice, on the preceding iNet world-wide, online conference. It is the second pamphlet in the series. The first, *Personalising learning: next steps in working laterally*, set the general context for the series, including the nine gateways and the sequence of conferences over the next five terms, as follows:

- student voice and assessment for learning (autumn 2004)
- learning to learn and the new technologies (spring 2005)
- curriculum and advice and guidance (summer 2005)
- workforce development and mentoring and coaching (autumn 2005)
- school organisation and design and leadership (spring 2006).

All secondary schools are already doing something, however small, in every gateway. At the same time, no one school is a leader in using all the gateways as routes to personalising learning. For each gateway a number of schools are pioneering innovation, and among whom are those who made conference presentations. The wealth of their practical experience with the gateways cannot be captured in a short pamphlet. Details of work in schools on these two gateways and case studies of their development may be found on the Trust website www.schoolsnetwork.org.uk. Further material and contacts for the schools making presentations are provided at the end of the pamphlet.

The discussion of each gateway explored in this pamphlet is in two parts. First, there is an introductory overview of the area, drawing on practical work and theoretical ideas. A select bibliography of outstanding, practitioner-friendly books is provided at the end of the pamphlet.
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In the second part, several stepping-stones are suggested as ways in which the gateway might be entered by a school. Personalising learning is a journey for both teachers and students: the learning involved cannot be rushed. The pace will vary from time to time as the journey develops its natural rhythms. Each stepping stone is really a collection of smaller stepping stones that vary in scale and scope. Progress is made as those involved gain the confidence to move forward to more ambitious activities.

The general advice for both student voice and assessment for learning is *think big – start small*. In other words, have the vision of where you might be when all the stepping stones are fully in place, embedded in the culture and routine life of the school. But start with a small group of willing volunteers, on a limited agenda of innovation. These become the foundations on which to build more challenging developments and draw other colleagues into the venture. Several of the reported case studies show how schools progressively developed student voice and assessment for learning over several years. These are not quick fix solutions.

It may be helpful to start work simultaneously, with different teams, on both student voice and assessment for learning. Several of our case studies reveal how they were developed in parallel. The teams soon discover the overlap and see how each supports and strengthens the other. Such an approach demonstrates how distributed innovation requires distributed leadership.

**Questions**

Who in your school is ready to think big about student voice or assessment for learning?

Which group among your staff is ready to undertake the work involved in the chosen gateway(s)?

What background preparation is needed? How much help comes from the resources, suggestions and potential contacts provided in this pamphlet?
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Personalising learning can be approached through any of the nine gateways. Student voice and assessment for learning are the first two gateways, examined in the SST/SHA conferences starting in October 2004, and reported in this series of pamphlets. In a sense they are natural places from which to begin personalisation, since both put the student at the centre of change, posing at least as many challenges to teachers as to the students. Both are also very closely bound up with enhancing the capacity of the student to focus on, and be active in, learning.

The first pamphlet, Personalising learning: next steps in working laterally, suggested that the nine gateways may be regarded as routes from the educational ‘imaginary’ of the 19th century to that of the 21st century. Of the 10 differences between these educational imaginaries, three are of particular relevance to student voice and assessment for learning:

**C19 educational imaginary**

- school is designed and organised on the basis of the factory model
- roles are sharply defined and segregated: teachers are clearly teachers (in their academic gowns) and students are dressed as, and behave like, students
- education is producer-led: teachers know best and have power to decide

**C21 educational imaginary**

- school is designed and organised to provide personalised education for all students


• roles are blurred and overlapping: teachers learn as well as teach, students mentor other students as well as learn for themselves, and new professional roles emerge to complement that of the teacher

• education is user-led (though at what point students rather than their parents are the users is an open question)

Student voice and assessment for learning have considerable impact on blurring the distinctness of teacher and student roles. The student sometimes takes on a teaching role, both of other students and of the teacher; this is necessary if teachers are to learn about student needs, learning preferences and strengths/weaknesses. Both gateways reflect the customisation aspect of personalisation, by which the education providers (teachers and other staff) seek to respond directly to student needs and preferences in the way teaching and learning are organised. Education, and its improvement, become more user-driven. Indeed, Lipson Community College in Plymouth explicitly treats students, parents, employers and the community as customers whose needs are to be served, and they have modified the work of W E Deming, who was so influential in Japanese industry, and models of total quality management, in pursuit of total quality learning. As they express it, ‘the college only exists for you, be you a student or a parent.’

**Commonalities to student voice and assessment for learning**

There are six main themes that are shared by these two gateways.

**Engagement** – both increase the student’s engagement in learning, in the activities of the classroom and the life of the school

**Responsibility** – both increase the student’s responsibility for self, for learning and behaviour, in part by giving the student more control over them

**Meta-cognitive skills** – both increase the student’s control over thinking and learning
Relationships with staff – both give these relationships greater maturity, since they become more open, more honest, and more collaborative: the relationships are characterised by mutual respect, grounded in self-esteem

Social skills – in both, the student’s capacity to communicate a point of view, to construct a coherent argument, to make a presentation and to assume a leadership role are all enhanced by new interpersonal skills; and of particular importance is the capacity and confidence to talk about work and learning

Participation – in both, the student’s active participation in classroom and school is enhanced because he/she is actively involved in the design of learning, teaching, assessment and the life of the school through processes of co-construction

These six themes can be seen as outcomes of personalisation when approached through the gateways of student voice and assessment for learning. All six help teachers and students to develop a shared, richer vocabulary for talking about learning. This is probably a critical ingredient in personalising learning.

In the exploration of student voice and assessment for learning you will also find links to other gateways, and in particular to learning how to learn, mentoring and coaching, and advice and guidance.

Questions

Look through the list of commonalities. Identify those in your school that are already strengths on which to build. Then identify those that are relatively weak and can be improved through your chosen gateway(s).

If your school has done work on neither assessment for learning nor student voice, is it possible for one group of staff to start work on one gateway and a second group to start on the other, with both groups actively working to the commonalities as described above?

If a school has worked on one of the two but not both, is it possible to introduce the second gateway by using the commonalities as a bridge into a development that intentionally strengthens the first gateway while building a new and complementary one?
Chapter 2 Student voice: the gateway

Like the other gateways, student voice can be defined in many ways. In its widest sense, it would include every way in which students are allowed or encouraged to voice their views or preferences. In this sense, all teachers from time to time encourage and are involved in student voice. It may be defined to include more novel ways in which students work with one another, such as buddy systems or peer tutoring (which in this series will be dealt with in the pamphlet on mentoring and coaching). But in this pamphlet, student voice is mainly about how students come to play a more active role in their education and schooling as a direct result of teachers becoming more attentive, in sustained or routine ways, to what students say about their experience of learning and of school life.

Student voice is, of all the gateways, the outstanding example of why the gateways are not a set of independent projects, add-ons or initiatives that become adjuncts to the school as it now is. Student voice is a gateway to change. Student voice flourishes in a particular kind of school culture. In turn, it helps to replenish such a culture – one that reflects and sustains the school as a community of learners.

The idea of community most neatly captures what student voice is about. It is not simply about introducing new structures, such as student councils, or about providing other occasional opportunities for students to speak their mind or have their say. It is about forming more open and trustful relationships between staff and students. This works when the same applies to relationships between students, between staff and students, among the staff, and between school leaders and their professional colleagues.
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Such relationships presuppose a willingness to listen, and to develop the skill of doing so attentively. This recognises that many meanings and intentions are implicit and subtle rather than obvious and explicit, and non-defensively accepts that open expression can sometimes be tinged with anger or resentment.

The fear that students will say things that are unwelcome or challenging, and maybe disrespectful and offensive, makes student voice more difficult for teachers than for students to embark on. There are natural suspicions among both students and teachers.

- For students, the fear is that staff do not really want to listen, but will only hear what they want to hear, and that ‘consultation’ is yet more empty rhetoric or merely tokenistic if students do not come up with the ‘right’ message.

- For staff, the nervousness is that the experience will be an unpleasant one that threatens their authority and control.

Both parties are in some respects vulnerable and need help with overcoming these fears and gaining confidence that student voice can have positive benefits for all. Some early benefits, however small, ensure progress and counteract cynicism. This means that teachers need to provide students with tangible evidence, not just promises, that their voice is having a real effect and making a difference. This is particularly important where student voice has offered suggestions about different ways of teaching or organising lessons. Colleagues also need to see evidence of the impact of student voice on student attitude and conduct if they are to be persuaded of its value. In short, everybody needs to see that student voice creates a partnership between staff and student that results in teaching and learning being co-constructed.

Part of the key is trust. Teachers have always expected students to trust them and are disappointed when they do not. But the fact is that teachers do not always trust students, especially the disaffected and disengaged; and even when they do, they may behave in ways that signal to students that they are in a low trust environment. Trust breeds trust, and leads to the climate
out of which mutual respect arises. It takes time for students to feel confident that they can be constructively critical of lessons and aspects of schooling without causing offence and incurring punitive reprisals. They often need considerable help, not in what to say, but how to say it so that it really can be heard. It takes time for sceptical or cautious teachers to become convinced that the potential benefits make it worth the risks involved. Confidence on both sides builds up, slowly, on relatively safe terrain. There thus arises the danger of student voice becoming restricted to a minority of teachers who feel comfortable with student voice activities and a minority of articulate, middle-class students who feel equally at home. But this does not generate the wider change in culture and climate on which the development of a learning community of mutual respect among all members depends.

As the development of student voice extends from safe topics or groups, more risks have to be taken and more problems will arise that need to be talked through to find solutions or alternative ways of working. Some experiments will have to be abandoned, but if the decision to abandon is shared by all the parties this can be done without regret and with positive lessons learned.

Student voice is a shorthand term that masks diverse elements; it is inherently heterogeneous. There are many subgroups of students, each of which takes a particular stance on an issue, making it very different to generalise about what the students think or want or advise. This lack of consensus can be used by staff as a means of discounting student voice altogether – ‘we have to decide because they can’t agree’. Alternatively, staff can claim a quite false consensus or crude majoritarianism on matters such as school policies or rules, general facilities or the environment of the school, which inevitably affect everyone. But it can also be the basis for sensitive exploration of how decisions can be reached without total agreement, involving various forms of compromise or an acceptance that sometimes one’s own view cannot prevail.

Dissent on issues that are of evident importance for students is natural and should always be expected and accepted; it does
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not have to be ignored or suppressed. As John MacBeath has suggested, there are in a school so many voices (some of which may not be verbal) that there are harmonies and discords. Strident shrieks, soft whispers, and silences, both natural and enforced. Replacing cacophony with the right acoustic balance is the task of leadership. Part of student voice is getting students to listen to one another and to respect different views. For this reason, in some schools student voice provides the basis for learning about, and in, democracy and citizenship.

Of particular importance in personalising learning is the voice of the individual student, by which every individual is able, with confidence, to express himself/herself to others, and particularly to staff. Many of the developments and activities taking place under the general umbrella of student voice are directed at the whole student body or subsections of it, such as school councils, rather than at the unique individual. It is important to recognise, however, that these collective expressions of student voice do bear on the potential of individual student voice for personalising learning, for two reasons.

• Even if the individual has no direct involvement in such activities, their existence shapes the general culture and climate so that students feel they are valued and trusted, and may express themselves in open ways

• Such activities affect teachers by making them generally more responsive to student voice and its potential value, both in what it says and in how it improves relationships

What is it that the individuals express? Points of view, opinions, ideas, suggestions, worries and concerns are obvious examples, some of which will relate directly to learning and to teaching. On matters of learning, and preferences or needs over, say, curriculum content or learning style, one soon encounters the distinction between student wants and student needs. Traditionally the teacher is the arbiter of these, on the assumption that students constantly confuse wants (short-term) with true needs (longer-term). Within student voice, there is a constant dialogue around this tension, to help the student to
recognise the difference between the two and to make decisions that give needs priority over wants, through a process of self-diagnosis and mature decision-making.

Personalising learning will often demand a *private conversation* between teacher and student. Too often teachers experience such conversations as largely one-sided, the student being taciturn, unforthcoming, defensive, even sullen, so that what was intended as an exchange or dialogue becomes something of a lecture. The kind of conversation that is sought, with non-defensive openness on both sides, is much more likely to arise when the student finds this teacher trustworthy and approachable. The student must also be able to set the conversation within the broader context of a school culture where students are valued and their voice is known to be valued and listened to.

On some issues, small group conversations can be powerful sources of student voice. The lone interview with a teacher can be intimidating to some students. The small circle protects and supports the reticent individual, who can nod agreement to what he or she would not have dared say, or who might build on a line that another student has started to explore. A group conversation does not look targeted at the individual, though all who participate may be affected by decisions or outcomes.

The most sensitive area tends to be student voice on teaching – how the teacher teaches and organises the lesson or treats the individual student. Teachers spend much time and effort trying to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of their teaching – but with experience tend to settle on particular ways of working as part of their teaching style and repertoire. Of course they keep an eye on student response and try to react flexibly when things do not seem to go well or as expected. Inviting students to give more direct and open feedback, in the form of their evaluations or suggestions, requires courage, for some of the messages may not be welcome. The object, however, is to create a partnership between the teacher and the class, or the teacher and the student, so that teaching-and-learning are co-constructed to make the experience more rewarding and more effective for both. It is here where student voice and assessment for learning most closely overlap.
When student voice works, there are gains all round. By convention students are expected to interrogate evidence and question assumptions in their critical evaluations of curricular work. But they are not expected to adopt a similar approach to the way the school is organised, or the way lessons and teaching are conducted. There is a new and empowering consistency when students are expected to be constructively critical of the whole of their school experience, not just the selected safe bits. This changes the general culture of the school, establishing that this is the natural way in which students are treated here. Thus students become ready to participate actively and responsibly in matters of high importance and consequence, such as a school self-evaluation.

Teachers are frequently surprised and delighted, even awed, at what emerges from student voice and at how experience of voice increases students’ commitment to learning and to the school. With hindsight, teachers often realise that when students are consulted about, and feel they have made an active contribution to, any proposed changes, they too have ownership of new practices and so work to make them a success. On this view, school improvement is not something that is decided by staff and then done to the student body, but an action programme, involving joint working parties, which the students help to shape and then to implement.

Through such serious dialogue between staff and students, new linguistic registers emerge. Relationships can be handled honestly but diplomatically; all sides have new negotiation skills. Students feel they are genuinely valued and trusted, and treated as real persons, often as adults. Student voice is thus a means to improving the partnership between teacher and taught in ways that enhance learning.

As teachers listen to students with open and trustful attention, students reveal more of themselves. This includes the exposure of weaknesses and anxieties, which the teacher needs to understand, but which might otherwise remain closely guarded, and so submerged. It also includes the revelation of unsuspected talents and interests, which might challenge and so broaden the teacher’s current conception of the student and
his or her abilities. At the same time, great care is needed by the teacher to avoid exploiting this situation, for to do so can cause a rupture in the newly won but highly fragile trust. For both staff and students such relationships can be a powerful education in emotional intelligence.

When student voice is most fully developed, teachers invite students to observe their lessons and provide feedback and suggestions on how they might be improved. Students are invited to interview applicants for staff appointments, and to contribute to their induction after appointment. Students are then true partners in learning.

**Questions**

In your school what is being done already in terms of student voice, however small it may seem? Can further developments be built on this?

To what extent is your school’s culture consonant with the further development of student voice? Is there a commitment in your school to the notion of school as a community of learners? What are the implications of your answer to these questions?

How will your leadership team create a climate in which student voice can prosper?

What fears about student voice do you think exist among staff and students? How might you discover these fears and begin to allay them?

What sorts of small group conversations are appropriate in your circumstances?

Is there a danger that in developing collective student voice activities you neglect the importance of the individual student’s voice in personalising learning?

When some benefits begin to show, how do you present these to others who are sceptical or cynical about student voice activities?
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