

THE STUDENT VOICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF PROMOTING FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT: This chapter presents a literature overview of the student voice in higher education, the main results from a three-year research project conducted at five Italian universities with the aim of investigating students' voices in higher education and how they offer insight into fostering Faculty Development.

KEYWORDS: teaching and learning methods, student voice, Faculty Development, professional development.

1. Introduction

The report on *Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions* (European Commission 2013) delivered a strong message that highlighted key issues for universities in Europe. The report states: «Higher education institutions need to create environments and feedback mechanisms and systems to allow students' views, learning experience, and their performance to be taken into account» (p. 28). When considering this recommendation in relation to Italian Universities, despite their long and prestigious history of scholarship and research, the teaching approaches predominantly reflect traditional transmission model practices (e.g., Pratt *et al.* 1998), with little direct and active participation by students in course design and curriculum development. This lack of participation is reflected in the classroom by an over-reliance on didactic teaching practices, highly formal student/faculty relationships, and little access for student input in course curricula. Counter to this historical tradition and like other universities in Europe, there is a growing interest in Italy for a better understanding of what faculties are really doing in the classroom and the degree of innovation that might actually be taking place. To respond to this need for didactic innovation and the modernization of teaching, a consortium of universities (Padua, Florence, Siena, Naples Parthenope, and Rome La Sapienza) developed the PRIN EMP&Co project, and the team from the University of Padua investigated the teaching and learning

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methods at Italian Universities, starting from the students' perspective. Based on the results of the survey, which provide a clear-cut image of the students' perceptions and highlight how traditional higher education teaching is still based on lecturing, formal relationships, and on practices in which the instructor is more of a «Sage on the Stage» than a «Guide on a Side» (Morrison 2014), we have been encouraging the implementation of Faculty Development opportunities for instructors from the universities involved in the EMP&Co project since 2014.

The strong message of the European Commission and the peculiarly Italian context encourages the development of discussions of and research into higher education teaching. One of the more relevant needs that has emerged is to break the students' silence, to listen to their views on classroom teaching, and to include them in the innovation process.

2. The Student Voice: an overview

Too often students in higher education are not listened to. They passively attend lectures and are not encouraged to express their voices and actively participate. The student voice is one of the main theoretical frameworks of this EMP&Co project. Notionally, it should be framed within learner-centred teaching, an umbrella concept, seen as a «new way of understanding, interpreting, or viewing something» (Meyer, Land, 2005 372). This represents not only a different approach to teaching, but a new understanding of learning that includes paying serious attention to the students' needs and appreciating their experiences and points of view in the classroom. (Blackie, Case, Jawitz 2010; Spalding 2014; Weimar 2013).

Students are the most important actors of the learning process, and therefore including their perspectives in the planning and programming of teaching and the curriculum is essential. At the same time, instructors can improve their teaching as they listen to their students as partners in the learning process. Implicit in this are the assumptions that students' feedback and evaluation have an impact on the transformation of teaching practices, and that students are more involved if they can participate and take an active part in the process.

Despite the importance of the student voice, the higher education literature on this construct is very limited. What is known is that student-faculty partnerships are rooted in beliefs that highlight the importance of considering: students' insights to make teaching engaging; the value of listening to their voices in designing teaching

and curricula; and the potential of changing perspectives for both to become better teachers and students. (Cook-Sather *et al.* 2014). Benefits for staff, students, and institutions include enhanced engagement, motivation, and learning; metacognitive awareness and a sense of identity; teaching and classroom experiences; student-staff relationships and development of a range of graduate attributes (Brockett 2015; Cook-Sather *et al.* 2014; Dirkx 2006; Spalding 2014; Taylor 2007). When students take responsibility and an active role in the learning process, they become more aware of what is being learned, changing their role from passive actors to active ones and fostering a related reorientation of the academic staff (Baxter-Magolda 2006; Cook-Sather *et al.* 2014).

Although there are many benefits, engaging the student voice does require the Faculty to take some risks and transform their role as educators (disciplinary content experts) to include their role as a facilitator, and work collaboratively with the students (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten 2011; Nygaard *et al.* 2013) with particular attention to students' interests and needs (Gentile 2014; Quinn, Owen 2016).

Even though there is a growing interest in teaching innovations in higher education, the student voice as a construct and a practice is not given the necessary attention when developing instructional practices (Smyth, McInerney 2012). Typically, teaching is related to the instructor's design and students have little influence on teaching approaches and curriculum development. (Bovill, Cook-Sather *et al.* 2015). Instructors are resistant to change and encouraging students' engagement. Furthermore, instructors in Italy generally have more formal relationships with students, which can discourage a frank and open climate for discussion. Furthermore, some of our classrooms accommodate a considerable number of students, up to two or three hundred, so that it can be even more difficult to build a rapport in this situation.

Moreover, institutional norms and practices in the Italian higher education system (managed by the government and the universities): for example, the considerable number of exam sessions, the freedom of the students to attend many courses or not, an over-reliance of certain programmes on a fixed curriculum and the institutions' overall lack of flexibility, do nothing to help create a collaborative teaching environment. Alternative strategies to promote innovation in our situations must be sought and applied to this context. This will be the challenge to face to create our own 'Italian-style' innovation and modernization.

The next paragraph will present some of the survey results collected within the EMP&Co project and analysed through the lens of student voice literature.

3. *The Student Voice: survey design*

The research realized as part of the EMP&Co project (Boffo, Fedeli *et al.*, eds.) was the most extensive survey of data exploring the students' voice in higher education in Italy. The questionnaire was submitted to over 50,000 students attending a variety of courses throughout the participating universities. It offers a unique national perspective of adult and higher education on a scale rarely presented and its potential is likely to lead to significant innovations in teaching and learning methods in both adult and higher education in Italy.

The findings of the study were organized around five focus areas:

1. Course organization;
2. Creation of a participatory environment;
3. Methods and resources for teaching and learning;
4. Feedback and assessment;
5. Work-related learning and university business dialogue.

Each area was represented by different items, 35 in total, asking students what percentage of instructors (0%–25%, between 25% and 50%, between 51% and 75%, more than 75% and 'I don't know') were engaged in these learner-centred teaching practices. Each focus area is discussed below.

4. *Course organization*

The first area of the survey aimed to explore the introductory part of the course and its organization ($\alpha = .801$). The items (7) investigated whether the faculty explained the programme at the beginning of the course, and presented the related contents. This is generally the first information to be shared with students and eventually discussed and negotiated. The other questions were related to the textbooks and resources in use for the course and the reason for the choice, so that the students have a better understanding and can support the instructors and their proposals. Furthermore, it is important that the instructor explain what the students need to know, and which skills they must develop during and after the course. The last two questions of this set were addressed to the students' needs and desires, to understand whether there were any additions needed to the programme presented and if the instructor was willing to change the programme based on the considerations that emerged in the discussion with the students.

5. *Creation of a participatory environment*

The second set of questions was related to the class setting and the relational climate concerning the degree of questioning, discussing, and reflection on students' experiences and prior knowledge in each Faculty. This section consisted of (4) questions titled *Creation of a participatory environment* ($\alpha = .799$). These questions aimed to explore the students' perceptions of their participation in the classroom and whether their ideas or proposals were taken into consideration by the instructors and other classmates.

6. *Methods and resources for teaching and learning*

The teaching methods surveyed in this section focused on active learning. Active learning is defined as «any instructional method that engages students in the learning process» (Coryell, 2016). Italy has a long tradition with instructors (Morrison, 2014), predominantly lecturing and demonstrating little interest in encouraging discussion and the sharing of student experiences. The aim of these items (9) was to investigate the methods and resources that the instructors devised for their classes ($\alpha = .756$). These methods included group work or individual work, a flipped classroom, the sharing of studies and research on the topic, and adaptation of the type of explanation or lecture to the students' level and skills. In contrast, the survey also asked students about the extent of PowerPoint use and how the instructors used it (e.g., reading the slides aloud, or integrating with real examples). Another focus was the delivery/availability of new and varied resources on some of the proposed topics for students to explore more deeply.

7. *Feedback and assessment*

The fourth area investigated the activities of feedback and assessment ($\alpha = .678$). This set of questions aimed to better understand the students' perceptions and how visible the processes of feedback and assessment were. The questions (8) investigated whether the instructors clearly communicated the methods and criteria of the assessment process in class. In addition, we asked students whether the instructors promoted self- and peer-evaluation in the group along with timely feedback during the activities they proposed in the classroom. The last two questions focused on the exam and how it was organized, if it was a rigidly pre-set type of exam or divided into separate parts to give students different tests and opportunities.

8. *Work-Related Learning and University-Business dialogue*

The last and fifth area ($\alpha = .837$), asked students to express their perceptions on work-related teaching and learning methods to promote the dialogue with work and business partners. This approach is defined in American literature as *Work-Related Learning* (WRL) (Dirkx 2011) and in Australian literature as *Work-Integrated Learning* (WIL) (Cooper, Orrell, Bowden 2010; Gardner, Barktus 2014). This area of the questionnaire consisted of seven questions that aimed to understand how instructors foster/encourage a dialogue with business and work partners in their teaching, whether they explain the connections between course contents and related professions, and if they consider and encourage students to reflect on the ethical aspects of professions and their utility. Students were also asked whether the instructors invite representatives of the job market to their classes, or had ever proposed activities or projects in cooperation with organizations and professional communities.

9. *The Student Voice: making sense of the findings*

The survey was completed by 3,760 students (2,453 females equal to 65.2% and 1,307 males equal to 34.8%) from five Italian Universities. After a test run at La Sapienza University of Rome and Siena University between December and January 2015 (Creswell, 2008), the questionnaire was administered to a sample of students enrolled during the 2014–2015 academic year in Bachelor's Degree or Master's Degree Courses, and the former regulation primary education programmes, attending the last year of the legal term of the course, plus those attending the third year of all Master's courses. Each was sent an invitation to complete the questionnaire on the Moodle platform. The survey data were downloaded into SPSS and Excel and analysed. The findings of this study were rather significant, reflecting a university system with a long and rich scholarly tradition with instructors who are somewhat resistant to innovative teaching approaches. The dominant teaching approach continues to be the practice of lecturing, with the Faculty fostering little interaction with students in the form of class discussions and group activities. Moreover, there is an obvious lack of attention in providing regular and consistent informal and formal feedback to students, promoting peer- and self-evaluation, and lastly, very few instructors are fostering dialogue with professional communities or promoting employability.

One way to make sense of the findings is to recognize that the Italian University system has a very long tradition of teacher-centred

teaching. Furthermore, the current national evaluation for faculty career advancement in Italian Universities is based exclusively on research ranking and very little attention is paid to the teaching and other organizational or administrative tasks. In addition, instructor-student relationships at the University are very formal, distant, and hierarchical. Most of the professors focus more on their performance in the classroom and less on the students' interest. Students' perceptions highlight a low level of engagement and collaboration between students and instructors as promoted by the student voice. Consistent with this perspective, assessment and feedback are integrated in the learning and teaching process. (Fedeli, Frison, Grion 2016). These data confirm that these processes are still managed only by the instructors, who are leading the teaching and assessment process without listening to the students or negotiating some of the criteria to be assessed with them.

10. Implications for Faculty Development and the Student Voice

A recent significant result of this study was the creation of a Faculty Development Programme at the University of Padua. This project, called Teaching4Learning@Unipd, began in November 2016, and was a direct result of the survey, with the aim of training the Faculty to promote students' participation in their courses. In addition, there was also a growing interest in de-privatizing (Adam, Mix 2014), teaching through the development of Faculty learning communities that encouraged sharing beliefs and values among colleagues, and supporting each other in innovating their teaching. The first learning communities were starting to form, introducing the use of an informal peer-observation process among instructors.

This programme aims to encourage greater awareness of the deep assumptions about teaching and learning and to offer the opportunity to learn new methods and techniques that encourage student participation and involvement. Bit by bit, policies, public relations, and mission statements can be revised to promote new strategies with the intention of innovating teaching approaches and students' participation in teaching and learning at universities.

The instructors involved in this project are self-selected, strongly interested and motivated to participate, with a significant propensity to sharing their own experience with other colleagues.

A group of experts at the University of Padua are working with a variety of departments, and are planning Faculty Development programmes. In the last two years, the results have been extremely

positive. Eight out of 32 departments have offered training to mixed groups (assistant-, associate-, and full professors) of 25–30 instructors including a one-week long training session for instructors from all the departments, a group of 28 young instructors who took part in a residential summer school and talked and worked together to innovate their teaching practices and share their thoughts and discuss their assumptions on teaching and learning.

Small groups of instructors who volunteer to come to the training sessions are starting to consider teaching an important developmental factor for their community. They collaborate, and share their teaching practices with colleagues. This is a synergistic process among faculty they share first-hand experiences, practices, and emotions about teaching in which trusting relationships are developed leading to further de-privatization of teaching. Consistent also with the research on transformative learning (Mezirow 1990, 2000; Taylor 2007) concerning significant personal change among adults, it is «trustful relationships that allow individuals to have questioning discussions, share information openly, and achieve mutual and consensual understanding» (Taylor 2007: 179). Multiple groups are starting to collaborate and create faculty learning communities (Cox 2004; Daly 2011; Nugent *et al.* 2008; Schlitz *et al.* 2009); learning communities (Mackenzie *et al.* 2010; Sherer, Shea, Kristensen 2003) of both interdisciplinary and disciplinary forms and differing in rank.

In the next month, the Faculty Development programmes will be evaluated both as to how they were received by the Faculty and the related impact on classroom practices. This will be a first attempt to see whether there has been integration of innovative practices in the classroom. It is interesting to monitor them and understand how to improve and share insights and ideas throughout the process.

This process of innovation is being promoted by the University management, which is starting to invest resources in developing organizational measures to respond to the need for change of some instructors, and to think how to develop policies to give more relevance to the teaching process in career evaluation.

The University is intending to allocate resources to finance more training and to create a reward system for those instructors who present projects that encourage student-instructor partnerships, and a higher evaluation of the teaching based on students' perceptions. Furthermore, instructional technology courses are being organized and offered to all instructors to promote the use of technologies in teaching, introducing blended courses and technological tools.

The intention is to create a system that places a higher priority on teaching and make it a part of career advancement policies. In a

monthly meeting with all the deans of the 32 departments, regular updates of Faculty Development efforts are shared. A first attempt at a reward system has been developed by issuing a 'badge' (a kind of certificate) for those instructors who take part in a Faculty Development training programme of at least 25 hours.

Despite these efforts, the change process is slow and incremental, particularly among individual faculty. Instructors and students are often resistant to new ways of teaching. More work needs to be done to help the Italian university to make sense of the nature of the institutional context and how the traditional culture of teacher-centred teaching is a significant barrier to more innovative learner-centred approaches to teaching.

11. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to share with the readers some of the results of the research developed within the PRIN EMP&Co project, in particular, the findings of the University of Padua unit, which was in charge of investigating teaching methods in our Italian university system. Further effort was made to highlight, through an overview of the student voice, the importance of listening to students and thereby encourage actions that consider their perceptions and some of their expressed needs.

The results of the research gave staunch support to the promotion of Faculty Development at the University of Padua with the aim of finding our own 'Italian way' to transform teaching and learning. The Faculty Development programme Teaching4Learning@Unipd began based on the evidence of the survey, study of the literature, and an investigation of national and international cases and situations. Efforts are continuing to find more formal and informal occasions to share the findings of this research project at conferences, workshops, seminars, and discussion circles at both national and international levels. These actions and results provide strong support in encouraging instructors to pay greater attention to the students' voice. This project, because of its highly competitive nature, gives the Faculty Development initiative greater credibility among colleagues at Italian Universities. Finally, the findings of the project have been shared with the didactic commission of the university, scientific committees, and other university bodies. Finally, the many studies and publications on the findings have supported our willingness and conviction that it is time to teach in a different way, time to engage the students' attention more in Italian and European Universities.

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