Sheffield Hallam University

Placing student voices at the heart of institutional dialogue

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This article is based on a workshop delivered by the two authors at the SEDA Spring Conference 2008 on Engaging with Student Expectations (Flint and Oxley, 2008).

Many of us face an increasingly difficult challenge in making it possible for students to attend staff development events and to participate in activities. Students have many pressures on their time and our experience at Sheffield Hallam University shows that although we can always identify many willing students who want to participate in and contribute to one day events, the reality is that they are often unable to as they have academic studies, assessments, part-time jobs, family commitments and often volunteering or Students' Union activities which make competing demands on their time.

However, placing student voice at the heart of institutional dialogue remains extremely important to us so we are constantly looking at creative ways to bring student voice to conversations about educational change. In this article we describe just one way of achieving that through an activity which is set in the context of an innovative and aspirational response to the National Student Survey (NSS) at our institution, and which uses a particular tool (Dialogue Sheets) to engage staff in dialogue.

The evidence to inform the content of this dialogue tool came directly from research with current final year students, the NSS free text comments, and voices from the sector about the student experience. In describing how we have used the tool in this particular context we have focused on how students feed back into our institution; how staff respond to and act on that feedback; and, how to identify ways to close the feedback loop by reflecting the institution's responses back to the students.

Setting the context
It is important in understanding our approaches to institutional dialogue to first have a brief overview of the authors' areas of work, the institution and our perspective on working with aspects of the National Student Survey.

Sheffield Hallam University
Sheffield Hallam is a post-92 institution with 30,000 students, 4,000 staff and a good reputation around learning and teaching, particularly e-learning. We place a strong focus on employability and have partnerships with organisations and industries regionally, nationally and internationally. The authors both belong to an Educational Change Team within the University's educational development unit (the Learning and Teaching Institute). Broadly our remit is to work with colleagues at all levels in the University to develop and articulate approaches to educational change which result in large scale and significant impact. One of the aims of our LTA Strategy is to be evidence informed, with a strong focus on evaluating the impact of change. This encompasses an appreciation of the role of conversation and dialogue in cultural change (Ford, 1999; Shaw, 2002) and working with students as agents of, and advocates for, change.

We have both been involved in various work around the NSS for some time, taking an approach which agrees with Prosser (2005: 1) in that we should focus on "interpreting the results as indicators of student experiences of the context in which their teaching and learning occur", using these to highlight areas for deeper exploration. We also take an aspirational approach reflected in the way we do not just react to the results, but use them to feed into strategic business planning and action planning for the future student experience. In the context of the event we are about to describe the most important factor to us was that we wanted to get beyond the scores to uncover what they meant in the very real context of our students' learning experiences.

Institutional level professional development event

'Preparing for the next National Student Survey' was the title of a one day staff development event which we developed, organised and ran, aimed at putting student voices at the heart of institutional dialogue (Flint et al, under review). The process leading up to the event itself was extremely important as it captured many conversations with our students and also afforded us the time to meaningfully populate the dialogue tool with a range of student voices, both internal and external. This significant amount of pre-work shaped the event programme, the content of the sheets and several of the outcomes.

We set ourselves 2 key starting points:
- Having an absolutely clear understanding of why we are getting the scores we are (both high and low)
- Feeding back to students on how we are responding to the National Student Survey

The aims of the event included:
- Understanding how students feed back to the University and how we deal with that feedback
- Starting new conversations and networks
- Achieving local ownership of future actions and plans

Our pre-work involved focusing on two groups of NSS questions: 'Teaching on my course' and 'Academic Support'. We carried out focus groups with our then current final year undergraduate students and, not unsurprisingly, found that their comments reinforced the free text from the previous NSS; for example, students experience the course, not the module. These discussions with students also emphasised the importance of feeding back to students on their feedback to the university, both to close the feedback loop and to maintain an ongoing dialogue and relationship. This was addressed through one of the outcomes from the event: a leaflet informing students about the next iteration of the NSS set within the context of real examples of how the University is working with issues raised in previous student feedback.

As we knew it would be difficult to guarantee that students could attend and participate in the event itself, we used the findings from the focus groups to populate the discussion tool and ensure that authentic student voices were represented. This was complemented by using all the various forms of student

feedback available to us to inform detailed materials and vignettes for activities at the event.

A broad mix of staff from across the University, including the Students' Union, participated in the event. We adopted a light touch approach to facilitation, reflecting our strong belief that through the use of authentic student voices, represented in the variety of materials used throughout the day, we would achieve the greatest impact. Although a high risk approach, this did prove to be the case and we achieved our original aims. The final activity of the event focused on developing solutions using ideas generated in the previous session and categorising them into easy to implement, innovative and ideas for the future. These were prioritised and some were worked up into named action plans.

An innovative discussion tool

Much of the success and distinctiveness of the above event can be attributed to the use of an innovative discussion tool: Dialogue Sheets. Dialogue Sheets are a sophisticated development of the World Cafe technique (Holtham and Courtney, 2006) and were originally developed through an FDTL5 project at Cass Business School, City University. We corresponded with the creators and agreed to share with them our subsequent experiences of using them. What the sheets did in our particular context was to bring authentic student voice to an activity in the absence of students being able to attend the event for the reasons given earlier. Their use enables difficult conversations to take place, enables challenging statements to be made in a non-threatening way, and generates valuable discussion and ideas for future actions. From a staff development perspective the activity also provides everyone round the table with an equal opportunity to speak.

We produced two different dialogue sheets for this particular event: one on student feedback to the institution and the other on the student learning experience.

Instructions on how to use the sheets are printed on them and primarily involve each of the 6-8 people sitting round the table to take it in turns to lead a conversation based on the 6-10 quotes around the edge of the sheets. Whoever leads the conversation is also responsible for capturing comments, ideas and reflections on the actual sheets. The task can take anything between 45 and 90 minutes to complete, with an emphasis on participants being encouraged to take ownership of the sheets and to engage in in-depth discussions. Consensus is encouraged, but is not an essential requirement.

The important message about using this particular tool is the need for thorough preparation. It is vital that staff think very carefully about the content in order to ensure a successful and productive dialogue during the task and to maximise meaningful engagement. The authenticity of the voices captured on the sheets is crucial. A maximum of two or three people should work on producing the statements; this part of the process requires the most effort, and should be done over a period of time to ensure the validity of what you want to discuss (we spent two months on pre-work for this particular dialogue sheet).The emphasis really should be on the quality of the dialogue and ways in which to change the conversations, rather than on the tool itself. The sheets are more effective when used as part of a longer process i.e. they are not the only activity on a particular

topic, but contribute to a wider debate, as was the case with all our other work around the NSS.

For the staff development event activity we collated statements, quotes and facts from the sector, undertook student focus groups and used NSS and other feedback free text comments. We also spent considerable time developing the prompt questions in order to generate good quality conversations and carefully selected the key words for the activity around the edge of the dialogue sheets by striking a balance between being provocative yet not being personally threatening. Another key factor in the use of dialogue sheets is to make absolutely sure that the right people are in the room.

Since the success of using the dialogue sheets at the event described we have gone on to use the tool in other contexts, such as engaging staff in the evaluation of our internal change academy, and have advised others in using them, for example at a Students' Union representative retreat and at a QSME conference. Feedback from presenting this work at the SEDA Spring Conference was very positive. The conversations generated through delegates using a dialogue sheet in this workshop were wide ranging, including: thinking about the difference between responding to students and acting on their feedback; getting better feedback from students by enabling them to see the bigger picture; and, closing the feedback loop in order to empower students in speaking and knowing they are being heard.

We have also developed a dialogue sheet which captures our own reflections whilst at the same time offering guidance on ways to use the tool. A final note of caution, however, that the power of tools like these lies in the appropriateness of use in particular environments and the novelty of the approach. These could be compromised by uncritical or over use.

Summary
The approach we have described combined collecting and responding to authentic student views with the opportunity for different staff groups to discuss the learning experience at their own institution. Returning to our opening statement about the difficulties in involving students in professional development events, we firmly believe that although not an equivalent replacement for actual student attendance, having authentic student voices represented through the dialogue sheets brought a powerful dimension to all the staff conversations and was much preferable than resorting to anecdote. One of our key reflections on using the tool is that the activity, within the context of the wider event, led to unique and tangible outcomes for the institution and students.

The way we organised and ran the event significantly influenced the way we have since worked as it positively demonstrated what can happen when academic developers adopt less traditional facilitation roles and use a specific tool which allows difficult and challenging conversations to take place. Our overall approach enabled us to achieve a truly deeper understanding of the student experience at our institution by going beyond working only with existing student feedback. The real and transferable impact is the difference an institution can make to the student experience by taking an aspirational approach which is proactive rather than reactive and which places dialogue at the heart of the process.

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