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## **Futurelab: Learner voice handbook**

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# Learner voice

a handbook from Futurelab



## Learner voice

A handbook from Futurelab

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# 00 thinking about learner voice

**The following questions are aimed to help you start thinking about the ways in which learner voice activities might be developed in your school or college, what might be achieved, and who might help you.**

## 1. Before engaging in learner voice activities

Is anything already happening in your school or college to promote learner voice?

- If so, how could this be improved or developed to become a more empowering experience for learners?
- How 'deeply' are learners involved in making decisions and agenda setting?
- Are all learners getting their voices heard and being listened to?

If not, what might be done?

- How can you promote the vision of learner voice in your institution?
- Will learners have a notable impact and influence in this area?

Are learners being listened to?

- Do learners actually feel they are being listened to?
- Who is listening to learners in your school or college?
- Who else needs to support any change?
- What evidence is there that learners' voices are being listened to and acted upon?
- Are any staff members responsible for or actively involved in embedding learner voice?
- Who else will need to support this to ensure actions arise?
- Are there others inside or outside of the institution - staff members, learners, parents or other individuals or groups - who might support you?

## 2. Removing the barriers

Who is being heard?

- Who is not taking part and why?
- Can any of the barriers to engagement be removed or overcome?
- Are the ways of listening to learners that are currently used appropriate?
- Are there alternative methods of listening to learners that could be developed?

Does the institutional culture and ethos support the development of learner voice?

- If not, why not?
- What needs to change in order for the voices of learners to be heard?
- What are the perceived barriers to change and how might these be overcome?
- How can staff support this cultural change?
- How can learners bring about change?
- Has your school or college publicly committed to supporting the development of learner voice?

## 3. Involving learners

Are there clear ways in which learners are involved in decision making processes?

- Are there enough or suitable consultative processes for gaining the views of learners?
- Is there a clear commitment to keep learners informed about issues and decisions that affect them?
- Are learners regularly involved in ongoing dialogue about decisions that affect them?
- Are learners consulted from the outset?
- Do staff understand and act upon learners' views?
- Are decision making processes shared between staff and pupils?
- Do learners have ownership, responsibility and management powers for setting agendas and organising action?

What tools or methods, if any, are being used for listening to learners' voices?

- Are other methods more suitable for empowering learners?
- Does the school or college offer a range of different types and levels of engagement to understand and respond to the needs of learners?
- Are there different opportunities and ways for learners to have an input and an impact on decisions?
- Are there alternative or more effective ways of involving learners that have not yet been used?
- Can new technologies provide alternative approaches that empower learners?

## 4. Taking learner voice forward in your institution

Which areas(s) or issue(s) might be good for developing and embedding learner voice?

- Why is learner voice important to you and your school or college?
- What will developing learner voice achieve?
- Can you identify clear benefits of promoting learner voice?
- What issues and questions might be explored and why?
- Why are these important issues for learners?
- Are any learners actively involved in representing their own views or those of their peers?
- Are learners actively involved in researching key issues?
- Are learners encouraged to become researchers within your institution?
- Is there support and are there opportunities for learners to become active and independent researchers?

## 10 reasons to promote learner voice

Should anyone need convincing, below are 10 key reasons why learner voice activities should be promoted.

1. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child reflects a new vision of the child. Article 12 states that young people should be granted the right to express their views freely. A number of other conventions and Government policies also state that learners have the right to freedom of expression and should have their views listened to and accounted for in relation to the services that affect them.
2. Research shows that embedding learner voice has a range of benefits, including deeper engagement with learning, improved meta-cognitive skills, greater responsibility amongst learners and better relationships between learners and staff.
3. Despite the vast changes that have recently occurred within the education system, learners are still seldom consulted or heard. This needs to change.
4. The Government is pursuing personalised education. Learner voice is a fundamental aspect of personalisation and perhaps the most important 'gateway' for change and improvement.
5. Learner voice needs to be viewed as a push towards a change in 'cultural attitude'. This needs to be supported by a varied range of ways and mechanisms to ensure the views of learners are heard and acted upon.
6. Despite a range of tools for promoting learner voice being readily available, examples of good practice remain relatively rare. In many cases learners are consulted through 'formal' and 'traditional' methods on issues pre-determined by the school and staff.
7. Learner voice should not be a tokenistic or add-on exercise. It should represent a deeper cultural change towards genuine ongoing participation and engagement with learners. Much still needs to be done to improve the quality and level of engagement with learners about their education.
8. Learners and young people are increasingly being consulted about and expected to take responsibility for other aspects of their lives. In education, the learner needs to be viewed as the consumer with a responsibility and a stake in shaping the service provided.
9. Digital technologies represent an important element, providing tools to support learner participation. The fact that many of these tools are not automatically associated with formal education may make them particularly powerful in helping to ensure learners have a voice.
10. How many young people are choosing to interact with new technologies represents a significant change in the way they consume, create, communicate and share information. There is an increased emphasis on 'online spaces' that allow for the development of communities of interest. These often evolve from the ground up and are jointly 'owned' and influenced by the people who use them. These technologies offer great, yet largely untapped potential for embedding learner voice in education.

## FOREWORD

One of Futurelab's primary aims is to better understand the role that digital technologies might play in education. In order to do this, we bring together expertise from practising educators, educational policymakers, learners, and the creative and technological industries, as well as the academic research community, to develop and evaluate prototypes of the sorts of digital resources that might be seen in schools in the future.

Our handbooks draw on a range of research, literature and knowledge in various fields to provide insights and guidance regarding the use and development of new technologies and new approaches to education.

This particular handbook is the result of a partnership between Futurelab and the English Secondary Students' Association. It arose out of a shared belief in the need for significant change in order to ensure that the views and requirements of learners are better accounted for, and also from a conviction to highlight the benefits this can bring.

The main aims of this handbook are:

- to summarise the research findings and literature in the field
- to highlight the policy context and the need for change
- to demonstrate the benefits of listening to learners and the barriers that exist to doing so
- to provide useful pointers concerning the development of learner voice activities.
- to encourage learners and educators to take practical action
- to outline the potential role of new technologies to empower learners and enable them to have their say.

While this handbook does not offer definitive statements or insights, we hope you will find it a useful guide and introduction to the broader area. If you have any comments to make, or suggestions about other projects and research we should be aware of, please do let us know.

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# 01 introduction: listening to the voices of learners – a time for change

Despite the vast number of changes in the education system in recent years, learners are seldom consulted and remain largely unheard in the change process. If education is to become more personalised, then the views of learners must be heard. However, embedding 'learner voice'<sup>1</sup> is not just about changing outcomes or finding solutions to existing 'issues' but rather it is about changing the very processes, mechanisms and ways in which learners can have a direct influence on their education.

Futurelab's recent report on personalisation<sup>2</sup> expressed the belief that the education system should be re-shaped around the needs of the learner rather than the learner merely conforming to the system. This requires significant changes in the culture of education and the relationships between schools, teachers and learners. More specifically, it requires a willingness for the views of learners to be listened to. Learners need to be encouraged to become actively involved in decisions about their education and there must be appropriate ways for them to do so.

The Government has clearly stated its intention to move towards a 'personalised' education system. In terms of education, one of its main priorities is "putting the learner at the centre"<sup>3</sup>, as "a partner in learning, not a passive recipient"<sup>4</sup>. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) states that personalised education is not a new initiative but rather a "philosophy in education" that allows pupils to have "a real say about their learning"<sup>5</sup>.

**...Young people respond well to the challenge of responsibility... I strongly support the principle of ensuring that our children and young people participate more effectively in democratic process...<sup>6</sup>**

Charles Clarke MP,  
former Secretary of State for Education



Create-A-Scape workshop

Personalising education<sup>7</sup> means offering greater choice for the learner and finding more ways of getting their voices heard. Learners need to be active in making their own voices heard but schools and teachers should also take a lead in developing ways to enable the views and opinions of learners to be expressed, allowing them to enter into dialogue and to bring about change.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this handbook the term 'learner voice' is used. It should be recognised however that there will be no single learner voice. The term used here refers to developing a culture and processes whereby learners of all ages are consulted and proactively engage with shaping their own educational experiences.

<sup>2</sup> Green, H, Facer, K and Rudd, T (2005). Personalisation and Digital Technologies. Bristol: Futurelab. [www.futurelab.org.uk/research/personalisation.htm](http://www.futurelab.org.uk/research/personalisation.htm)

<sup>3</sup> DfES Standards Site. Learning About Personalisation. [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit/personalisation/pllearn/?version=1](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit/personalisation/pllearn/?version=1)

<sup>4</sup> DfES. Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners. Foreword by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills.

<sup>5</sup> DfES personalised learning website. [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/personalisedlearning/about/](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/personalisedlearning/about/)

<sup>6</sup> DfES (2003). Your Voice: A summary of the consultation document entitled 'Working Together'. London: HMSO. [www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/conResults.cfm?consultationId=1222](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/conResults.cfm?consultationId=1222) (last accessed 23 April 2006).

<sup>7</sup> There are different definitions of personalisation. Whilst all recognise the need for increased learner voice and choice, some place greater overt emphasis on the engagement of learners in actively co-producing educational scripts or learning pathways.

# 01 introduction: listening to the voices of learners – a time for change

The real goal however, may well be to go further still. In a report sent out to all schools<sup>8</sup>, Leadbeater<sup>9</sup> argues that personalisation is not only about making sure learners have a voice in their education but are also active participants in defining what the service actually looks like in the first place. This notion of personalisation through participation may not yet be possible using existing methods. Therefore, new ways of enabling learners' voices to be heard may have to be considered.

This handbook draws on examples, case studies and research to provide learners and educators, particularly those in secondary schools and colleges, with information and ideas for promoting the voices of learners<sup>10</sup>. It does not offer a comprehensive set of tools for achieving greater learner voice within the education system. Rather it offers a range of examples and considers a variety of approaches that might be used to empower learners. It is ultimately up to learners and

teachers to consider the best ways of promoting learner voice and decide what the most appropriate tools for their particular needs are at any given time.

The aim of this handbook is to increase the likelihood of learners becoming more active in shaping their own educational experiences by promoting debate about the need to change the culture of education and the ways new digital technologies might be harnessed to empower learners. We hope it will be used as a tool to encourage such dialogue and to help promote the principles behind a truly personalised education system. Ultimately, the handbook aims to encourage learners to become active in shaping and directing their own education and to promote deeper engagement in learning.

In the next section are just a few of the core reasons why increasing learner voice is important for learners, teachers and the education system as a whole.



<sup>8</sup> DfES personalised learning website. [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit/pdf/Learningaboutpersonalisation.pdf?version=1](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit/pdf/Learningaboutpersonalisation.pdf?version=1)

<sup>9</sup> Leadbeater, C (2005). *Personalisation Through Participation: A New Script for Public Services*. London: Demos.

<sup>10</sup> References to research articles, books and relevant project websites are included in the footnotes throughout this handbook. However, a reading list is provided at the end of the handbook that will point the reader towards the most accessible and easily available texts in this area.

## 02 so why is learner voice important?

Research increasingly suggests that when learners are really engaged in shaping and leading their own learning and education this can result in benefits for learners, teachers, the institution and the system as a whole. At the same time, failure to engage with learners in the education process risks increasing disengagement and disillusion amongst learners with their educational experiences. There is also a risk that education will become one of the few areas of social life in which the core communities and consumers of a service remain unconsulted. For example, in other walks of life, few effective and sustainable relationships are built without taking into account the views of others. Learners are part of a community and the best way of empowering communities is to listen to them and act upon their views. When people have a voice and an influence on decisions and outcomes they are more likely to participate and also to learn through participation<sup>11</sup>.

However, whilst there is much talk about learner voice today, there is a wide range of differing practices “with quite different intentions and aspirations for the future”<sup>12</sup>. Listening to learners and acting on what is heard is not yet the norm and within schools there are often few suitable means for doing so. When learners are invited to offer their informed thoughts on issues, there is seldom someone obligated to listen or act on the findings. Where learners are consulted, this often tends to be on issues pre-determined by the school and its staff, and as a result, some learners may lack the motivation to engage with the issues. It is still rare for learners to be empowered to actually set any agendas that might bring about change. Many of the ways in which learners are consulted tend to be through more ‘formal’ and ‘traditional’ methods, which may also exclude some students from participating. Moreover, seeking learners’ views is, in some instances, seen as an inconvenience or a burden.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance: Beetham, D (1992). *Liberal democracy and the limits of democratization*. In D Held (ed) *Prospects for Democracy: North, South, East, West*. Cambridge: Polity.



Mudlarking in Deptford trials

This section outlines some of the main reasons for taking learner voice seriously.

### Why is learner voice important for learners?

According to research by Fielding<sup>13</sup>, by eliciting the learner’s voice the learner will:

- feel that their views are taken seriously, which makes them feel more respected
- be better placed to see how their views translate into positive outcomes for their learning and the educational establishment
- be more inclined to reflect and discuss their learning, which should provide the tools to influence what, where and when they learn.

<sup>12</sup> Fielding, M (ed) (2001a). *Special issue on student voice*. *Forum*, Volume 43, Issue 2.

<sup>13</sup> Fielding, M (2004). *Student Voice and Personalised Learning: a Presentation to the Specialist Schools Trust and Secondary Heads Association personalising learning conference*.

# 02 so why is learner voice important?

## Why is learner voice important for educators?

In an education system where learners have little involvement over the shape, form or content of their education it is unsurprising that we witness significant levels of disengagement and disaffection from learning. It has been documented that there is a need to change this model of provision to one whereby learners are engaged as 'co-designers' of their own educational experience. However, there are many challenges in this type of provision – not least in developing appropriate and effective practices for listening to learners. However, Fielding also points out that those educators who engage learners as co-creators in their learning will:

- understand and gain insights to the hopes learners have for their schools, their learning and the wider society with which they engage
- be surprised by what they learn about their students
- develop more meaningful partnerships with learners that will help with learner development and provide challenging new ways to work together
- see positive changes through engagement of the learner, including improvements in attitudes toward learning.

## Why is learner voice important for the education system?

To achieve the system-wide changes that personalisation requires, educational institutions need to understand, engage with and respond to learner needs. Fielding believes that those educational institutions that fully engage in eliciting the learner voice will:

- become learning organisations, which will develop a clearer identity and a distinct ethos of reciprocal learning
- help develop an agenda for change with which learners can identify; early learner commitment and focusing change in the right places will save time
- develop teaching and learning as a partnership with learners, which will lead to improvements.

Hargreaves<sup>14</sup> also identifies a range of benefits that arise from embedding student voice<sup>15</sup>. These include deeper engagement with learning, improved meta-cognitive skills, better relationships between students and staff and greater responsibility amongst learners. However, he also suggests that learner voice is the most powerful 'lever' for personalising education.

For many, embedding learner voice requires a cultural shift in attitude and also practice. Many staff may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with any related change in relationships that may arise as they could be perceived to threaten their authority and that of the school. However, it has been recognised that it can be an extremely rewarding and empowering experience for teachers, who get to employ their professional skills as educators to foster and support the development of responsible and active learners. Such changes in approach, the longer-term culture fostered in school and the improved relationships between teachers and learners, may also lead to a greater culture of innovation and adaptability within the school itself, as greater numbers will be engaged in exploring new ways of working.

<sup>14</sup> Personalising Learning 2: Student Voice and Assessment for Learning. David Hargreaves. November 2004. London: Specialist Schools Trust. Secondary Heads Association.

<sup>15</sup> Note, Hargreaves and Fielding use the term 'student voice' not 'learner voice'.

At Eggbuckland Community College, an 'Access Manager Program' was introduced to develop leadership and management skills in young people. Over time, the scheme developed and now students as young as 12 are taking control of ICT facilities at lunch and break-times. Learners manage rooms for others, operate lessons and assess the ability of other students. They also mentor students through an apprenticeship and manage other aspects of behaviour and wellbeing. The ethos of the college enabled such a scheme and it has now developed to provide alternative student roles<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Buckley, D (2003). Case Study of Eggbuckland Community College e-Learning Strategy. ALITE 11/4/05.

## 02 so why is learner voice important?

The Government's Every Child Matters<sup>17</sup> and Youth Matters<sup>18</sup> legislation both strongly advocate greater responsibility and respect for young people's views. Such legislation clearly emphasises the need to find appropriate tools to embed learner voice within education. Moreover, as a human right<sup>19</sup>, young people should be entitled to have an input and contribute to decisions and issues that affect their lives. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>20</sup> clearly outlines the need to respect and support the rights and responsibilities of children. Article 12 states:

**Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child<sup>21</sup>.**

This clearly means that we should not expect learners merely to comment on what has already been decided without them but rather that they become active agents in negotiating the form, content and organisation of their education.

Given the vast amount of time learners spend in education<sup>22</sup>, ensuring learners are active participants should be a priority area. However, whilst good practice does occur there has not yet been the necessary and fundamental cultural shift required to ensure education becomes truly participatory.

In other walks of life 'providers' will often engage in dialogue with 'consumers', conduct research into their needs, and engage with them in order to shape the development of their products and services. Yet, in the 'education market', rarely are learners considered to be the consumer. This needs redressing and in doing so, we also need to consider issues surrounding power and relationships. There may be a need to move away from 'traditional' or 'formal' methods in order to engage with those who would otherwise not have a say.

The following sections go on to discuss in more detail what is meant by learner voice and what the principles behind it are.

<sup>17</sup> HM Government (2004). Every Child Matters: Change for Children. [www.everychildmatters.gov.uk](http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk)

<sup>18</sup> See DfES (2005). Youth Matters. Green Paper. [www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/youth/fore.shtml](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/youth/fore.shtml)

<sup>19</sup> It is also worth considering Article 10: 1 of the European Convention of Human Rights, which also states:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers."

This applies equally to young people as it does to adults and has been in force in the UK law since 2000. See the following:

[www.echr.coe.int/echr](http://www.echr.coe.int/echr)  
[www.pfc.org.uk/legal/echrtxt.htm](http://www.pfc.org.uk/legal/echrtxt.htm)

Other Acts, such as The Local Government Act 1999, require public authorities to consult with people who use their services. This means that education authorities also have a commitment to consult learners about the services provided. See:

[www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1999/19990027.htm](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1999/19990027.htm)

<sup>20</sup> It is also worth considering the content of articles 28 and 29, which relate specifically to education, and also articles 2, 13, 17 and 23 that refer to participation and non discrimination.

<sup>21</sup> See [www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm](http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm)

<sup>22</sup> See for example: Andrew Gallagher. Presentation at the Future of Learning Seminars: Future Learning Practice. Glasgow, 24-25 June 2005 Seminar Report. [www.internationalfuturesforum.com/fof/fof\\_glasgow\\_report.pdf](http://www.internationalfuturesforum.com/fof/fof_glasgow_report.pdf) Rutter, M et al (1979). 15000 Hours.

At Chichester College students are being regarded more as 'customers' who might choose to go elsewhere if they did not have their voices heard and the service provided was not up to scratch. As a result, the college has worked with students to empower learners, including the development of an in-house inspection of teaching by the students. There is also a range of other tools, such as surveys, questionnaires and so forth, through which students present their opinions on the quality of the service provided<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> This example was presented in The Guardian 4 April 2006: 'The tables are turned' by Peter Kingston. See also Chichester College: [www.chichester.ac.uk/general/index.htm](http://www.chichester.ac.uk/general/index.htm)

## 03 what is learner voice?

In short, learner voice is about empowering learners by providing appropriate ways of listening to their concerns, interests and needs in order to develop educational experiences better suited to those individuals. In this sense it is crucial to delivering a personalised education system. Below, we outline some associated terms in more detail in order to provide background and further issues to consider. Whilst these terms vary in their precise meaning, they are all interrelated and focus upon empowering learners. They also indicate the ways in which learners can be given greater opportunities to take responsibility over their own education.

**Learner voice** is not about learners shouting to be heard, nor is it teachers giving over all their 'powers' to learners. Learner voice is about considering the perspectives and ideas of learners, respecting what everyone has to say, taking risks, sharing, listening, engaging and working together in partnership<sup>24</sup>. Promoting greater learner voice means providing an educational experience where learners are involved in decisions about how, what and when they learn, with whom, and the type of environments in which this occurs.

At one end of the spectrum, learner voice is about engagement where learners are kept informed as to how decisions are taken and the processes involved. For instance, this may be in the form of a textual handout with management making the commitment to keep learners informed.

However, it is the other end of this spectrum that offers greater empowerment for the learner. Decision making about the form, style, content and purpose of education is negotiated and shared. Learners are offered greater opportunities to have their voices heard, to affect outcomes and bring about change.

This handbook provides examples across the full spectrum of engagement but encourages educators and learners to consider the benefits to learning and teaching in a system where learners actively set the agenda and shape their own 'service', supported by educators.

**Learner democracy** embodies the notion that a democratic experience is one where the voices of all are equally important. In this learning experience the aim is for the learners to take ownership of their own learning. This means that formal, informal and non-formal learning which could take place in other learning environments beyond the school are all equally valid. In these circumstances, learner democracy encourages the skills for learners to participate as citizens beyond the classroom. This concept of 'citizenship' is seen as essential to developing a vibrant, participative democracy and in encouraging personal development within a social context<sup>25</sup>.



<sup>24</sup> Johnson, L, Lewis, B et al (2001). A Guide to Engaging Youth in Leadership and Decision Making in Service-Learning Programs

<sup>25</sup> CILIP (2006) Lifelong learning – a definition. Online at [www.cilip.org.uk/professionalguidance/lifelonglearning/lifelonglearningdefinition.htm](http://www.cilip.org.uk/professionalguidance/lifelonglearning/lifelonglearningdefinition.htm).

# 03 what is learner voice?

**Learner advocacy** means offering the appropriate activities that help learners say what they want, obtain their rights, represent their interests and gain the support they need. Achieving this should lead to increased empowerment and the ability to make decisions and choices; improved autonomy to be a self-determining learner and the recognition of the rights of citizenship. Those organisations that represent and support learners, such as Local Authorities (LAs), teaching and student unions, and those involved in the wider 'educare' agenda need to share an understanding of learner advocacy which promotes the learner voice agenda. This may require such organisations to rethink the tools used for eliciting the voice of learners to ensure that all learners have their say. More importantly, schools need to openly commit to actively pursuing a learner voice agenda in order to bring about a broader cultural change in education.

**Learner autonomy** requires the learner's full involvement in planning, monitoring and evaluating his or her learning. Such involvement in turn requires the development of explicit skills of reflection and analysis<sup>26</sup>. In this context the learner intentionally learns how to learn, with the learning content and approach being set by the learners themselves, in consultation with teachers.

Learner autonomy represents the move from a pedagogic model of learning (teacher-focused) toward a more andragogic model (learner-focused). Conner<sup>27</sup> suggests this model has five key issues that should be considered and addressed in formal learning.

These are:

- letting learners know why something is important to learn
- showing learners how to direct themselves through information
- relating the topic to the learners' own experiences and background
- understanding learners will not learn effectively until they are ready and motivated to do so
- helping learners to overcome inhibitions, behaviours and beliefs that may represent a barrier to their effective learning.

This type of learner-focused learning has been applied more readily to the teaching and learning of adults or in more informal learning contexts. In many cases learners are supported to create their own learning aims, goals and ways of working.

This type of approach is also consistent with other current approaches. In focusing on 'building learning power'<sup>28</sup> educators are encouraged to think differently in order to help young people become better learners and to coach them in 'learning to learn'. The learning to learn approach<sup>29</sup> focuses on developing a set of principles and skills that can be applied to any area but through which learning becomes an empowering activity. Similarly, the Enquiring Minds<sup>30</sup> project focuses on creating opportunities for learners to be independent, responsible knowledge creators and to conduct their own research.

<sup>26</sup> Little, D (2004). *Democracy, Discourse and Learner Autonomy in the Foreign Language Classroom*.

<sup>27</sup> Conner, ML (2004). *Andragogy and Pedagogy*.

<sup>28</sup> Professor Guy Claxton has undertaken extensive work in this area: [www.buildinglearningpower.co.uk](http://www.buildinglearningpower.co.uk)

<sup>29</sup> For instance see [www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk/projects/L2L/l2lindex.htm](http://www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk/projects/L2L/l2lindex.htm)

<sup>30</sup> See [www.enquiringminds.org.uk](http://www.enquiringminds.org.uk)

# 03 what is learner voice?

A good starting exercise is to consider what terms such as learner voice, learner advocacy, learner democracy and learner autonomy may mean in your school or college. What impact could and should each one have on the way the school and college operates and what effect could this have on its focus.



In light of the issues above, we would argue that:

- Learner voice is about self esteem and personal development for teachers as well as learners. It urges educators to reform with and not for the learner<sup>31</sup>.
- It is more than simply listening to learners; it means engaging learners as concerned partners, coherent contributors, and equal agents of change<sup>32</sup>.
- Learner voice involves providing learners with opportunities to exercise the same levels of social responsibility and personal freedom that they have in many other aspects of their lives. It should embrace the responsibility that learners should have in shaping their learning, thereby promoting relevant skills needed for the future.
- We must accept that those most often in touch with learners – the educators – may not always be the most well informed about what learners really think<sup>33</sup>.
- Learners themselves may feel staff will not want to listen or respond, or perhaps will only respond to things they wish to hear. However, research suggests that the vast majority of learners behave in a sensible, pragmatic and mature manner, especially if they feel their views and opinions are being valued.

The following section outlines approaches and models to set learner voice activities in context and to give some indication of the degrees of engagement that are possible.

<sup>31</sup> Wilson, B and Corbett HD (2001). *Listening to Urban Kids: School Reform and the Teachers They Want*.

<sup>32</sup> Fletcher, A (2004). *Meaningful Student Involvement: Research Guide*.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*

# 04 levels of learner voice participation

## 'LADDER' OF PARTICIPATION

Type of participation	Type of involvement	Level of engagement
<b>Manipulation</b>	Learners are directed by staff and tend not to be informed of the issues. Learners may be asked to 'rubberstamp' decisions already taken by staff	<b>Non participation</b>
<b>Decoration</b>	Learners may be indirectly involved in decisions or 'campaigns' but they are not fully aware of their rights, their possible involvement or how decisions might affect them	<b>Non participation</b>
<b>Informing</b>	Learners are merely informed of action and changes but their views are not actively sought	<b>Non participation</b>
<b>Consultation</b>	Learners are kept fully informed and encouraged to express their opinions but have little or no impact on outcomes	<b>Tokenism</b>
<b>Placation</b>	Learners are consulted and informed. Learners views are listened to in order to inform the decision making process but this does not guarantee any changes learners may have wanted	<b>Tokenism</b>
<b>Partnership</b>	Learners are consulted and informed in decision making processes. Outcomes are the result of negotiations between staff and learners	<b>Tokenism</b>
<b>Delegated power</b>	Staff still inform agenda for action but learners are given responsibility for managing aspects or all of any initiatives or programmes that result. Decisions are shared with staff	<b>Learner empowerment</b>
<b>Learner control</b>	Learners initiate agendas and are given responsibility and power for management of issues and to bring about change. Power is delegated to learners and they are active in designing their education	<b>Learner empowerment</b>

The table above draws on Arnstein's<sup>34</sup> ladder of participation and Hart's<sup>35</sup> work on children's participation<sup>36</sup>. It shows that involvement can occur on a number of levels, ranging from those described as 'non participation' to the fully participatory and

active (learner empowerment). In terms of embedding learner voice, the aim is to ensure there is a culture and appropriate ways of working to enable more approaches like those at the bottom of the table (learner empowerment).

<sup>34</sup> Arnstein, S (1969). A ladder of citizen participation in the USA. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35, 4 pp 216-24.

<sup>35</sup> Hart, R (1992). *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. UNICEF.

<sup>36</sup> For a more detailed explanation of the issues involving levels of participation and how to engage learners, see *Research in Practice: Young People's Participation*. [www.rip.org.uk/index.asp](http://www.rip.org.uk/index.asp)

# 04 levels of learner voice participation

**No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts off from its youth severs its lifeline.**

Kofi Annan

The following model is based on a range of work in the field. It represents the different levels of engagement and types of involvement possible. It also outlines some of the activities and tools that may be broadly associated with each.

It needs to be pointed out that the categories outlined in the tables are not distinct and may overlap. They have been placed in such categories for illustrative purposes and to give a flavour of the different types of approaches possible. The types of activities and tools do not solely belong in one single category. However, they do provide a clear example of the different types of participation and will help you consider the type of approaches that could be used in your school or college. Different approaches and ways of embedding the views of learners may also operate simultaneously.

Ultimately however, in terms of promoting a participatory culture and promoting learner voice, the principal aim should be to gravitate towards a situation where learners are actively involved in setting their own agendas; where there are varied and established mechanisms to support them in doing so; and where their participation leads to action.

The following section outlines some of the changes needed to foster a culture to support learner voice and looks at some of the areas and ways in which this might develop.



Hitchers workshop

# 04 levels of learner voice participation

## TYPES OF PARTICIPATION, ACTIVITIES AND TOOLS

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
<b>LEARNER ENGAGEMENT</b>	Learners are regularly and reliably informed, made aware of their rights and ways of participating	Staff obtain views of learners. Learners receive full feedback on decisions taken	Staff work with learners throughout decision making process to ensure views are understood and taken into account	All aspects of decision making processes are undertaken in partnership with learners	Learners set agendas for change. Self organisation and responsibility over management is given to learners
	Learners informed	Learner consulted	Learner input	Learner shaped	Learner owned
<b>TYPES OF ACTIVITY</b>	Staff presentations Assemblies Meetings Forums	Learners as research respondents/ participants  Designated consultation space, time and meetings  Peer support, mentoring and tutoring  Circle time  Feedback/right to reply strategies	Learner governors  Student councils; Advisory committees; Learners on appointment panels  Participation skills training  Learners as counsellors  Learner voice improvement plans	Students as co-researchers  Learners on management committees  Learner-shaped policy making  Learner interest/ action groups  School-wide, external learner voice policies/plans	Students as researchers and research designers (independent)  Delegated decision making  Learner managers  External policy on learner voice culture  Learner 'ownership' of resources, events, policies and learning  Learners as teachers
	Fact and information sheets  Letters  Websites  Noticeboards  Access to documents, minutes, plans etc	Comment/opinion polls  Focus group (learners as respondents)  Staff-led consultation workshops  Staff-led questionnaires, interviews etc (closed – staff-led)	Workshops  Voting  Focus groups (active)  Joint-led consultations  Interviews (open – staff-directed)	Learner-led consultations  Interviews (open/ closed learner-directed)  Staff/learner ballots  Open forums	Learner-managed research programmes  Learner agenda setting  Learner-managed consultation activities and tools development

Sands School is a democratic school promoting learner participation and the voice of learners in the management and day-to-day running of school life. Students have the right to choose what to study and to challenge the relevance of anything they are studying in dialogue with staff. The school strives to provide a rich educational environment through sharing responsibilities for its upkeep. There are ongoing discussions between staff and learners, stemming from a belief that young people want to develop their skills and be actively involved in organising their own education<sup>37</sup>.

# 05 developing learner voice

**Personalised learning is about tailoring education to individual need, interest and aptitude to fulfil every young person's potential.**

David Miliband MP, 2004

If we are to achieve the vision set out above, we need appropriate ways and mechanisms to do so. Embedding learner voice means ensuring education is more representative, effective and focused around the learner. It means moving beyond 'tick box' consultation on pre-determined issues towards genuine engagement and agenda setting by learners.

## Developing a 'new cultural attitude'

Whilst there are numerous ways learners can be involved in the day-to-day issues that have an effect on their educational experiences, it is crucial that these are not tokenistic. Embedding learner voice should become a central and fundamental aspect of all educational institutions. As Hargreaves suggests, student voice is not just an 'add on' but rather it should be viewed as a "gateway to change":

**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<sup>38</sup>.**

In this sense, learner voice should be viewed as a push towards a "new cultural attitude" supported by a varied range of approaches and methods to bring about personalised education. Indeed, Hargreaves<sup>39</sup> goes on to suggest that 'student voice' itself is one of nine 'interconnected gateways' for bringing about personalised learning and teaching. These nine

'gateways' are listed below and may provide a starting point for considering where learners could or should have an input.

- curriculum
- learning to learn
- workforce development
- assessment for learning
- school organisation and design
- new technologies
- student voice
- advice and guidance
- mentoring.

A valuable exercise is to consider how learner voice can be promoted and have an impact in each of the nine areas or 'gateways' listed and what the most suitable methods for doing so might be.

## Learners setting the agenda

Work from the Research in Practice<sup>40</sup> group identifies that the quality of participation is enhanced when people are well informed, are regularly consulted, are prepared for any meetings or activities and when their agendas or issues are accounted for in any such participatory processes. This means taking approaches that can facilitate and address the issues important to learners rather than just those set by staff. Not only must learners be provided with the opportunity to have their say but staff will also need to provide evidence that learners' voices are being heard and are having an impact.

<sup>38</sup> Hargreaves, D (2004). *Personalising Learning 2: Student Voice and Assessment for Learning*. November 2004. London: Specialist Schools Trust. Secondary Heads Association.

<sup>39</sup> For a fuller discussion, see: *Personalising Learning: Next Steps in Working Laterally*. David Hargreaves. October 2004. London: Specialist Schools Trust. Secondary Heads Association.

<sup>40</sup> Research in Practice (2006). *Young People's Participation. Quality Protects Research Briefing No 3*. [www.rip.org.uk/publications/documents/QPB/QPRB3.asp](http://www.rip.org.uk/publications/documents/QPB/QPRB3.asp) (last accessed 15 June 2006).

# 05 developing learner voice

There are so many ways learners can have a say and have an impact upon how their school or college is run and organised. There are numerous tools and mechanisms through which this can be achieved and many possible areas to consider. For example, learners may want to voice their opinion on school-wide, class, subject or form-specific issues or even issues beyond the institution's current areas for concern.

Sometimes learners may lack the opportunities, methods or even the vocabulary to explore and express their own ideas. It is therefore important that a culture is developed which helps learners express themselves, and as importantly, that there are appropriate tools for learners to do so. These must take account of the different ages, abilities and preferred communication channels that will be present.

## Many voices

It is worth remembering that increasing the degree to which learners participate and have their say on issues does not mean that learners will have a 'single voice', hold the same opinions or will prioritise one issue over another. As work from Research in Practice<sup>41</sup> points out, there is a need to distinguish between participation in decisions that have an effect on learners<sup>42</sup> as individuals and those affecting them as a group. For example, the former requires greater emphasis on ways of listening to and understanding the individual's perspective, accounting for their views and feelings, wishes and so forth. The latter may require greater emphasis on issues relating to development and identification, as well as focus on broader issues relating to the provision and monitoring of educational services and institutional policies and practice.

A range of hierarchies and power relationships will be in operation and there will be a degree of both overt and covert exclusion and also self-exclusion from various ways and means of participating. Some learners may not be comfortable engaging with established and formal methods for participating and some may not be able to, or feel they can, articulate themselves in these forums. If this is the case, then a full and emerging culture of participation cannot be said to exist.

## Deciding on your approach

Whilst potentially a range of methods and ways to gather the views of the learner may exist, no single approach will be correct in all circumstances and it may therefore be more appropriate to use a range of different approaches at any one time. The approach chosen may depend on a range of factors, such as time, the type of issue, the needs of learners, how many people the particular issue affects, who else is involved in the decision making process, as well as a whole range of other factors.



Hitchers workshop

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*

<sup>42</sup> Research in Practice focuses on children but for the purpose of this text and in keeping with its focus and target audience, the same could theoretically be applied to all learners, irrespective of age.

## 05 developing learner voice

Considering the most appropriate tools and effective approaches for eliciting learner voice can and should also be incorporated into broader discussions surrounding the overall approach to learner engagement and what the likely impacts of any actions may be. Staff will need to play an important and significant role in advising, mentoring, supporting and discussing the appropriateness of use of any of the participatory tools and approaches that may be used, yet ultimate decisions should remain those of the learners. Involving learners should be an ongoing and evolving process that requires regular engagement with a range of activities of varying magnitude and impact but should be seen as part of a broader culture of participation. In committing to this culture, schools and colleges may have to reconsider power relations and the processes and tools for engagement. Ultimately, fostering good

participation requires an appropriate climate that overtly demonstrates that learner voice is a school-wide priority that will lead to change.

Learner voice is similarly not about providing a single set of 'answers' or actions but rather emphasising the development of a range of methods and a culture of regular engagement and co-design around educational practices that empower students as a whole.

Questionnaires, interviews, surveys, formal and informal consultation, focus groups, opinion polls, discussion groups and so forth are just a few of the potentially useful methods for gathering the opinions of learners. The more learners can be involved in collecting data, organising themselves and setting the agendas and areas to be explored and discussed, the deeper the level of engagement.



Savannah trials

# 05 developing learner voice

Listed below are just a few of the numerous types of events, roles and activities that could provide possible channels for greater learner engagement and involvement.

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<b>Ballots</b>	can be particularly useful when seeking consensus decisions but not as useful when seeking to gauge the breadth of opinions that may exist. These are more empowering when the 'issues' to be balloted on are decided by learners in the first instance.
<b>Elections</b>	for example, learners may want to vote for representatives to promote issues important to them in a range of formal and less formal ways, or around particular issues.
<b>Councils</b>	formal student councils tend to have some say in the day-to-day running of the school or college. How much power to effect outcomes and how well they represent all learners, however, are important issues to consider and the establishment of feedback mechanisms in the school to ensure that issues raised by councils are heard and responded to requires consideration.
<b>Management committees</b>	learners may be on a range of such committees to make sure learners have more formal representation alongside staff. Alternatively learners could establish their own committees in order to manage aspects of their own educational experiences.
<b>Student governors</b>	learners are represented on governors' boards to help ensure learners' opinions and issues are conveyed to those who may be responsible for strategic decisions.
<b>Forums and consultation workshops</b>	are good ways of gauging the views of learners and exploring issues in more depth. They may provide a good way of exploring the views and key issues of learners, especially if these are organised and managed by learners themselves. Ensuring space, time and opportunities for these to happen is essential, as is ensuring the outcomes are acted upon.
<b>Message boards</b>	these can take a variety of forms. Largely used to convey information to learners but can also provide a way in which learners can express their own opinions or convey information to others.
<b>Student researchers</b>	vast amounts of data is kept about learners yet little is collected by them. Student research can promote a range of skills, especially if the research agendas, planning and data collection are set and managed by learners.
<b>Circle time</b>	represents a good way for learners (and educators) to discuss issues that are relevant to them. Can be very flexible and open in the way they are conducted and the range of issues covered.
<b>'Buddying'</b>	ensuring learners talk through issues in pairs (or small groups) may provide a useful but less intimidating way of discussing and raising issues. 'Buddies' can be matched in a range of different ways. For example paired with others with similar view or interest in order to start forming issues for debate or produce action plans. Alternatively, learners could be matched with 'buddies' with different views to promote dialogue, or in different age to promote greater understanding of both issues and processes.
<b>Interest and action groups</b>	useful in conveying more in-depth knowledge on specific issues and interests or around particular problems.

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# 05 developing learner voice

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<b>Learner counsellors</b>	learners engaged in providing support for the wellbeing and welfare of others, and identifying generic issues that may require wider attention.
<b>Participation skills training sessions</b>	may be formal or informal but would enable learners to become more confident and capable of presenting their views and ideas and become familiar with the whole range of participatory mechanisms. These sessions can be organised by staff and/or learners.
<b>Learner rights information sessions</b>	where learners are informed of their rights and the procedures for ensuring they are upheld.
<b>Public commitment to learner voice policies and approaches</b>	schools and colleges committing to promoting learner voice and ensuring this is conveyed through promotional material and embedded in the ethos of the organisation, with learners and staff being regularly informed of this commitment.

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Ultimately, the emphasis should be on embedding learner voice as an ongoing process and evolving a set of practices rather than one-off exercises. A number of events, activities and methods may occur concurrently, and as will be outlined later, new technologies can also provide other routes for learner involvement. The focus should be on trying to ensure that learners become increasingly more involved in setting the issues and agendas. Whilst we identify a range of ways of promoting learner voice, we strongly advise those undertaking work in this area to seek out other books and resources<sup>43</sup> to support their specific activities.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that promoting the voices of learners will take many different guises and within each institution there will be differing possibilities based on a whole range of cultural, structural, human and institutional factors. However, it must be stated that promoting learner voice within any institution should not be undertaken merely on the basis that it will improve 'standards' or indeed for any other purpose other than to elicit learner voice with the express intention of empowering learners as co-designers of their educational experiences. One way of ensuring this happens is to involve learners directly as researchers.

<sup>43</sup> See for example:

Research in Practice (2006). Young People's Participation. Quality Protects Research Briefing No 3. [www.rip.org.uk/publications/documents/QPB/QPRB3.asp](http://www.rip.org.uk/publications/documents/QPB/QPRB3.asp) (last accessed 15 June 2006).

Flutter, J and Rudduck, J (2004). Consulting Pupils: What's in it for Schools? London: Routledge Falmer.

Arnot, M, McIntyre, D, Pedder, D and Reay, D (2003). Consultation in the Classroom. Cambridge: Pearson Publishing.

MacBeath, J, Demetriou, H, Rudduck, J and Myers, K (2003).

Consulting Pupils: A Toolkit for Teachers. Cambridge: Pearson Publishing.

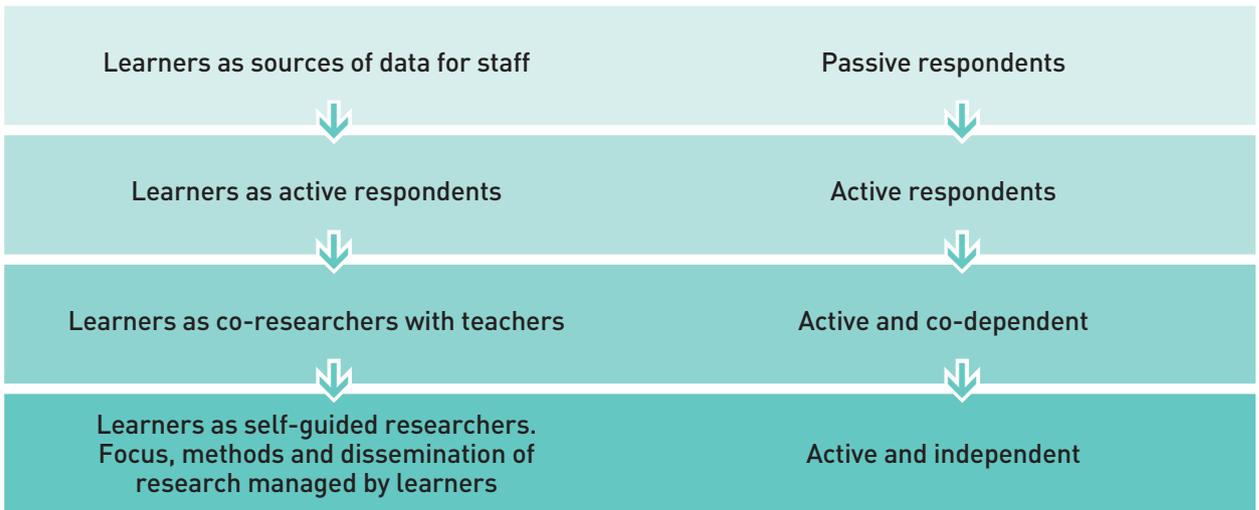
# 05 developing learner voice

## Learners as researchers

Whilst there are different levels and ways of engaging with learners, the underlying principle and desired goal is that learner voice is not something separate from day-to-day education but should be part of the very fabric of a learning institution. One highly regarded means of achieving this is by actively involving learners as researchers whereby they identify key issues, collect and analyse data about aspects of their educational experiences. This means getting learners actively involved in various consultation, investigation,

research, data collection, analysis, management and dissemination activities. As there are varying degrees of learner engagement within a school, there are also differing levels at which learners might be involved as researchers<sup>44</sup>.

Drawing on the work of Fielding and Bragg<sup>45</sup>, it is worthwhile considering some of the broad types of roles for learners in research processes, as mapped in the table below.



<sup>44</sup> The following site provides further information and links, as well as case study examples:  
[www.studentsasresearchers.nexus.edu.au/pagesetup.html](http://www.studentsasresearchers.nexus.edu.au/pagesetup.html)

<sup>45</sup> See for example:  
Fielding, M (2001). Students as radical agents of change. *Journal of Educational Change* 2  
Fielding, M and Bragg, S (2003). *Students as Researchers: Making a Difference*.

# 05 developing learner voice

Whilst this is presented as a progressive scale, this is not to say one approach is necessarily better than another. Different approaches may be more appropriate for some people at different times, more applicable to specific issues, or interwoven into particular aspects of skills developed. The role learners play may also be mediated by the particular level of research capability and autonomy possible at any particular point. However, the overall aim must be towards deeper engagement, with learners acting as independent and active researchers, setting their own agendas to explore areas they feel are important or of interest. In so doing learners develop a greater range of research, dissemination, planning, management and interpersonal skills. They also become more active in day-to-day activities in the school or college, gain a better insight into the views of others and contribute to change.

Fielding and Bragg<sup>46</sup> note that whilst there have been different types of learner involvement in research projects, it may be preferable to focus upon developing new partnerships between students and teachers, ones where responsibilities are shared and in which students become active agents of change. They suggest that the process of being a researcher can help support the learner's sense of agency, development of inquiry skills and social competences, as well as supporting them to be active, creative and to reflect on their own learning. At the heart of all of this, is the sense that learners begin

to feel that they can have an input and that they are not just turning up to 'consume' an education system that is already mapped out for them. Along with other approaches to engaging learners, student research can be as much a tool for incorporating learners' views and changing the relationships and culture within institutions. Psychologically and symbolically, being involved in data collection processes that inform dialogue, debate and the way the school is run, is both rewarding and empowering. Moreover, the school or college is provided with evidence to help inform the way it operates. Involving students as researchers therefore sends out a clear message that learning is a two-way process<sup>47</sup>.



Create-A-Scape workshop

<sup>46</sup> Fielding, M and Bragg, S (2003). *Students as Researchers: Making a Difference*. Cambridge: Pearson Publishing.

<sup>47</sup> There are a range of resources that aim to offer more in-depth and practical support for encouraging and supporting learners as researchers. The following are very useful: The Children's Research Centre, at the Open University, which seeks to empower young people as researchers on topics that are important to them. [www.childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk](http://www.childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk) The work of Fielding and Bragg, already mentioned, is both practical and informative. Other publications in the same series, 'Consulting Pupils About Teaching and Learning', offer further interesting and useful materials.

Sharnbrook Upper School and Community College has been moving towards greater student involvement since the 1990s. Initially adopting a teacher-led approach, it was recognised that they were simply using student involvement as a data source. Subsequently the school began a series of reforms that led them toward involving students in the creation and structure of surveys, questionnaires and also as co-researchers. The school feels that starting small and evolving toward a more student-led approach, where students are researchers and set agendas for school improvement, is a good approach. As the project developed it also began to engage disaffected students. The school now has a position of Student Voice and Research Support Coordinator and a research steering group that meets half-termly<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> Drawn from: Raymond, L, Student involvement in school improvement. Forum, Vol 43, No 2, 2001; and also Sharnbrook website: [www.sharnbrook.beds.sch.uk](http://www.sharnbrook.beds.sch.uk)

# 06 digital technologies: new possibilities

## New ways of thinking, participating and doing

**The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice<sup>49</sup>.**

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 13:1

As was noted earlier, there are numerous ways in which learners can have a say on how their school or college is run and organised and about the kind of learning they engage in. However, we have not yet considered the vast, new opportunities offered through digital technologies and tools.

### Learners in the digital age

Increasingly young people own and/or can access a range of new technologies and tools and as a result are taking responsibility and exercising greater autonomy in more and more aspects of their lives beyond formal learning. Increasingly individuals now have at their disposal the tools to be able to acquire, retrieve, capture and disseminate information for themselves through social networks which they can help develop, organise and play an active role in. Outside formal education, individuals are becoming active creators and producers of knowledge and information. This represents a distinct cultural change in the way people work and collaborate and the tools they use for doing so.

Many such digital tools offer spaces, places and times for deeper engagement by learners in their own learning. They potentially allow agendas to be set by learners and offer opportunities for regular participation on an evolving and relevant range of issues. However, the education system has neither changed significantly to incorporate these approaches and offer learners the same degree of autonomy and responsibility, nor has it effectively harnessed the digital tools that are used daily by many learners beyond formal education to tailor their own informal learning towards their own interests. In the main, schools tend to use new technologies largely as a means of delivering curriculum-related content and capturing pupil data. Their use tends to be restricted by time and location and their perceived appropriateness to predefined tasks. Many schools therefore, are already beginning to look outdated in the ways they use technologies, which often bear little comparison to the ways they are used in the 'real world'. Learners are effectively being asked to "power down at the school gates<sup>50</sup>.

This mismatch suggests that practices are based on outdated constructions about what it means to be a learner in the digital age. To provide a more responsive education requires educators to consider young people in their own right, accounting for relationships and practices that they develop inside and outside of formal education and the active roles they play in shaping their daily lives. In this sense they should also be considered as individuals who have experience, skills and knowledge that can and should be utilised to help shape and improve the institutions and services that they encounter.

<sup>49</sup> [www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm](http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm)

<sup>50</sup> See: Rudd, T (2006). Provocation Paper: Re-thinking Learning Networks: Home, School and Community. [www.futurelab.org.uk/events/seminars/provocation\\_paper\\_01.htm](http://www.futurelab.org.uk/events/seminars/provocation_paper_01.htm)

# 06 digital technologies: new possibilities

As Heppell<sup>51</sup> states:

**In the 21st century we don't hear the students' voices through a representative 'student council', we hear it through the channels that technology has brought us: texts, podcasts, diaries and blogs, conversations and more.**

## Modernising the process

If we are serious about promoting learner voice and participation, we need to consider how to modernise the process, which could mean using mechanisms that may not be solely based in or 'owned' by schools and colleges. For some learners, who is perceived to 'own' these tools and who can have their say through them, may have a significant impact on engagement. Learners may find digital environments effective and accessible because they present contexts that allow learners to express themselves more fully and set their own agendas free from any individual or institutional pressure to conform. This is especially true for those who may not, for whatever reason, feel they can participate or get their voices heard through existing methods.

Consider the additional ways of promoting learner voice and participation presented by personal computers, mobile phones, the internet, digital cameras, digital video and so forth. Furthermore, consider the different types of participation offered through e-mail, texting, picture messaging, phone voting, web-based survey tools, message boards, discussion groups, social software, wikis, blogs, podcasts and so on. Imagine the different types of collaboration, representation and

communication channels potentially offered to learners as a result. In many schools and colleges, the use of such tools will not have been considered, let alone as a means for promoting learner voice.

That said, digital technologies alone will not bring about change. A broader commitment is needed to "reshaping the education system around the learner and to enable the learner's voice to be heard more powerfully in shaping the curriculum, contexts and practices of their learning both in and out of school"<sup>52</sup>. Increasingly, digital technologies will open the various pathways to more personalised ways of learning. It therefore makes sense to utilise them to empower learners and to enable them to express their needs and bring about changes in their education.

In short, if the learner is to be at the heart of the process, then it would seem appropriate to consider how best to incorporate these technologies to compliment and improve more conventional methods. Whilst not unique, this may seem quite radical to some. However, if there is to be a serious learner voice commitment, then there has to be an equal appreciation of the various ways in which learners might prefer to communicate.

The following section provides just a few of the rapidly growing ways in which digital technologies might be used to increase learner voice. These are presented to give a flavour of what might be possible rather than offering a 'prescriptive' account as to the precise application and suitability. Any approach will be dependent on the context, issues and learners involved and should be a matter of negotiation and discussion.

<sup>51</sup> Heppell, S. (2006). Personalisation of Assessment. Provocation paper for DfES Personalised Content workshop. February 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Futurelab. Personalisation and Digital Technologies. [www.futurelab.org.uk/research/personalisation.htm](http://www.futurelab.org.uk/research/personalisation.htm)

# 06 digital technologies: new possibilities

## Digital possibilities in practice

### Mobile devices and mobile phones

Although the power of mobile technologies and digital images as a tool for participation is an area still being explored, a number of good examples of how these are being used already exist. These commonly owned devices have been used in a number of ways, for example, for texting thoughts on a particular pre-defined issue or sending anonymous feedback on aspects of formal education, such as the teaching, management or organisation of institutions and so on. Increasingly, mobile devices are becoming more complex and have greater power, functionality and capability. Linked to other software, they can also enable people to vote on issues with responses collated and presented publicly.

Mobile devices capable of capturing images have been used in a number of interesting ways. For example, the 'I Love Lewisham'<sup>53</sup> project illustrates how local communities can be given a voice and how authorities can be made to be publicly and visibly accountable. The idea is that residents use their mobile phones to take pictures of things they don't like, such as rubbish, graffiti, fly-tipping, abandoned cars and so forth. The images are sent into the council who review the pictures and decide what to do to resolve the problem. Once completed, a picture of what has been done is taken and posted as evidence of action. This is an interesting example of how new technologies can empower citizens to bring about change in their environment.

### Visual and audio

Digital technologies can be used to support learner voice and discussions around issues of importance to individuals and groups. With some of these tools, learners can create powerful visual or audio narratives, or ways of representing their views, feelings or ideas. These open up a whole new set of possibilities for greater and better dialogue between learners and between learners and staff.

For example, Radiowaves<sup>54</sup> is an online, on-demand internet-based radio station offering students the opportunity to create and publish their own work through a network of online radio stations. Using text, audio or pictures, learners can take responsibility for communicating key issues that affect them to a wider audience. Not only are such tools original and potentially effective ways to enhance learner voice, but actually producing material for 'audience broadcast' can promote the development of a whole range of technical, social and other learning skills.

The development of new technologies and the changing opportunities presented by digital media increasingly results in 'meanings' being created through a mixture of language, sound and image. As Burnard<sup>55</sup> suggests, there are a number of image-based techniques<sup>56</sup> that can be used as powerful and sometimes novel research tools and which can also offer great insights into learners' perspectives. These may be of particular use for those learners who are reticent, for one reason or another, to represent their views through more traditional means. For example, sites such as Flickr<sup>57</sup> allow people to take, post, tag, store, search and comment upon one another's

<sup>53</sup> [www.lovetewisham.org](http://www.lovetewisham.org)

<sup>54</sup> [www.radiowaves.co.uk](http://www.radiowaves.co.uk)

<sup>55</sup> Burnard, P (2001). Using Image-based Techniques in Researching Pupil Perspectives. Paper given at the Teaching and Learning Research Programme: Consulting pupils about teaching and learning. University of Cambridge.

<sup>56</sup> See also: Prosser, J (1988). Image-based Research: a Sourcebook for Qualitative Researchers. London: Falmer.

<sup>57</sup> [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)

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images that are shared online. Organising photos becomes a collaborative venture and discussions about the images can develop, with wider communities and networks of interest developing as a result. As a form of collective or individual expression, such sites can provide an excellent basis for debate about important issues. Moreover, images can also be readily linked to other documents to present even more powerful expressions and representations.

## Online communities and online spaces: Social software<sup>58</sup>

The term 'social software' covers a range of different software currently used online, including internet discussion forums, messaging, social networking<sup>59</sup> and social bookmarking tools<sup>60</sup>, weblogs<sup>61</sup> (or blogs) and wikis<sup>62</sup>. All of these are growing in popularity and are often referred to in relation to a series of developments referred to as 'Web 2.0'. The social nature of learning is reflected in the way the software has developed and the protocols surrounding its use, which focus upon collaboration and social interaction. Another underlying principle is the belief that through responsible, individual contributions, the wider user community will benefit. Social software can be an extremely powerful means of communicating, sharing views and facilitating action<sup>63</sup>. It is essential, however, that safety and security issues are considered and discussed prior to any online activity taking place<sup>64</sup>.

Clearly, these digital technologies can be used to facilitate learner participation in ongoing, rapid and evolving consultative exercises. Currently communicative, collaborative and community-building aspects of social software are precisely the components required to help develop a learner voice culture, a more personalised approach to education, and greater knowledge exchange with others. Their use might also enable peer-to-peer learning and can overcome some structural barriers to participation. For example, iBlogs are easy to update personal websites arranged in diary format, which often allow readers to leave comments and responses and post links to other blogs. There have been safety concerns about young people's use of blogs but recent research suggests that the vast majority of communication between bloggers is with people who also know one another in an offline context, and that these sites are used often as a means of expressing self identity. In this sense they could offer less intimidating environments for learners to raise issues that concern them and to develop their own agendas. There are also a growing number of schools seeing the power of blogging as a mechanism for expression and discussion for learners about their educational experiences. Some offer good examples of how social software has been used to engage learners in a range of activities<sup>65</sup>.

<sup>58</sup> For a more detailed description, information and examples, see: Futurelab's Opening Education: Social Software and Learning. [www.futurelab.org.uk/research/opening\\_education.htm](http://www.futurelab.org.uk/research/opening_education.htm)

<sup>59</sup> See for example: [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)  
[www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com)

<sup>60</sup> See for example: [www.blinklist.com](http://www.blinklist.com)  
[del.icio.us](http://del.icio.us)

<sup>61</sup> Free blogs can be started at numerous sites, including Blogger ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)) or WordPress ([wordpress.com](http://wordpress.com)). See also, Myspace ([www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)) and Livejournal ([www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com)).

<sup>62</sup> See for varied examples: [www.weblogg-ed.com](http://www.weblogg-ed.com)  
[www.wikiville.org.uk](http://www.wikiville.org.uk)  
[en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)

<sup>63</sup> For a radical example of social software being used for 'political' action, see: [www.zephorias.org/thoughts/archives/2006/03/28/myspace\\_hr\\_4437.html](http://www.zephorias.org/thoughts/archives/2006/03/28/myspace_hr_4437.html)

<sup>64</sup> See for example: [www.internetsafetyzone.com](http://www.internetsafetyzone.com)  
[schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=is&catcode=ss\\_to\\_es\\_tl\\_uor\\_03&rid=9931](http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=is&catcode=ss_to_es_tl_uor_03&rid=9931)

<sup>65</sup> See for example: [edu.blogs.com/edublogs/safety/index.html](http://edu.blogs.com/edublogs/safety/index.html)  
[jhh.blogs.com](http://jhh.blogs.com)

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Wikis are sites that allow people to upload content to the internet which can then be extended and edited by a group of users. Perhaps the best known, one of the largest, and possibly the most freely accessible example, is the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia<sup>66</sup>. Developed collaboratively by many of its readers, Wikipedia relies on collaborative editing to ensure the range and quality of updated and expanding content. However, there are many examples of wikis that operate on a smaller scale yet make collaboration easy, acting as 'asynchronous social notebooks' for the specific needs of the groups using them. Individuals create passwords when setting up wikis, so that discussion, collaboration and modification is regulated by the users of the particular wiki. Wikia<sup>67</sup> allows people to build their own 'categorised' wiki-based websites and pages and to visit and contribute to those already created. The site includes a large education section where learners and teachers contribute materials. There are already sites and pages that learners and educators have created around a range of subjects, to support collaborative writing projects and to support a range of broader learning interests. Again, it is easy to see how these hold great potential for individuals to share, develop and work through ideas, modifying and adding to materials along the way in collaboration with others who share similar interests.

It is not inconceivable to think that such spaces could be used specifically to promote discussions around issues affecting learners. Whilst some spaces have no restrictions and are not aimed at formal education, others cater specifically for this sector<sup>68</sup>. This has obvious (although not fixed) implications for the degree of perceived ownership there might be over these tools but much will depend on how, why and by whom they are used.

Education-specific packages often give greater consideration to privacy and include useful extra functions such as assessment tools. For example, Edublogs<sup>69</sup> offers free blogs aimed specifically for pupils and teachers. Elgg<sup>70</sup> provides an 'open source' example, where social software tools such as blogs, podcasting and wikis are combined specifically for use in education. The self-directed nature of this resource represents a potential approach where control of many aspects of the learning process, which are currently largely controlled by teachers, can be handed over to learners. As the learner retains significant control, such tools may also provide a more conducive, alternative and informal environment for eliciting learner voice.

The nature and potential of these new technologies for use as tools for empowering learners in a vast number of ways is both exciting and challenging. However, as yet they remain largely untapped and under-used in formal education, despite their broader relevance and use outside formal learning institutions. They are potentially ideal tools for promoting the voices of learners and the very fact that they are not automatically associated with formal education may make them compelling and powerful tools for learners to use in order to get their voices heard. Social software encourages greater interaction and represents a shift in the ways people can connect, communicate and collaborate.

<sup>66</sup> [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)

<sup>67</sup> [www.wikia.com/wiki/Wikia](http://www.wikia.com/wiki/Wikia)

<sup>68</sup> See for example: Virtual Workspace [www.virtual-workspace.com](http://www.virtual-workspace.com) and Think.com [www.think.com](http://www.think.com)

<sup>69</sup> [edublogs.org](http://edublogs.org)

<sup>70</sup> [www.elgg.org](http://www.elgg.org)

# conclusion

Despite the calls for a more personalised education system, the vast majority of formal learning institutions do not have an embedded learner voice culture. Learners are seldom invited into true and ongoing dialogue that can lead to changes in the educational services provided. Whilst research has identified numerous benefits that this can have, and with numerous mechanisms available, good practice remains relatively rare. Much can be done to improve the quality, levels and types of engagement, and in this respect digital technologies potentially offer a compelling set of tools for empowering learners.

Many of these tools are already regularly accessed by learners and utilised in their informal learning for their own interests, yet they are seldom used in formal education and are rarely seen as participatory tools, despite their obvious potential. This reticence may partly reflect the limited and largely 'tokenistic' approach toward learner voice that currently exists. If these tools are to be fully exploited in formal education, a deeper cultural change is required that will ensure genuine and ongoing dialogue, and which also taps into the full range of cultural tools and resources that many have access to in their day-to-day lives outside the classroom.

Learners have the right to freedom of expression and should have their views listened to and accounted for through whichever means are appropriate. Both staff and learners need to be more aware of learner's rights and have an understanding that these are their institutions, their services and that this is their education. Learners need to be supported and encouraged to work with others to make sure this entitlement is being fulfilled. Despite there being relatively few good examples of active involvement of learners in co-designing their educational experiences, there are a number of encouraging signs and moreover, there is a groundswell of support in this area from a range of organisations. Whilst this is encouraging, it is up to individual learners and staff to also see themselves as active agents capable of bringing about changes in their particular institutions. In this way there is much greater possibility of bringing about the wider and necessary transformation that will make education for learners more democratic, empowering and engaging.



# other useful links & resources

## **English Secondary Students' Association (ESSA)**

- is a student led organisation that works in partnership with other organisations to bring the views of schools students to the attention of local and national policy-makers in relation to education issues. ESSA also supports students to become more involved in decision-making in their own school. ESSA provides materials, training, links and information that can support student voice activities.

**[www.studentvoice.co.uk](http://www.studentvoice.co.uk)**

**Personalised Education Now** - has a foundation of principles and core values which suggest the education landscape must cultivate active democratically-minded communities. It seeks to develop a rich, diverse and personalised educational landscape to meet the learning needs, lifestyles and life choices made by individuals, families and communities.

**[c.person.ed.gn.apc.org](http://c.person.ed.gn.apc.org)**

**Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE)** - offers a range of resources around children's rights and participation, with key principles outlined and good links to other relevant materials in a 'participation library'.

**[www.crae.org.uk](http://www.crae.org.uk)**

**[www.crae.org.uk/cms/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=201&Itemid=145](http://www.crae.org.uk/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=201&Itemid=145)**

**Consulting Pupils** - website with information for schools interested in students as researchers work.

**[www.consultingpupils.co.uk](http://www.consultingpupils.co.uk)**

**Enquiring Minds** - a three-year research and development programme, which aims to create opportunities for learners to be independent, take responsibility for their own learning, create their own knowledge and conduct their own research in the context of a rich digital information landscape.

**[www.enquiringminds.org.uk](http://www.enquiringminds.org.uk)**

**The Phoenix Education Trust** - supports the principles of democratic education in practice, gathers and disseminates examples of good practice and aims to inform policy makers, learners and teachers about the value of children and young people's participation in decision-making within education.

**[www.phoenixeducation.co.uk](http://www.phoenixeducation.co.uk)**

## **International Democratic Education Network (IDEN)**

- a worldwide network of schools, organisations and individuals which upholds ideals around respect and trust, equality of status between children and adults. It promotes freedom of choice and democratic governance by children and adults together.

**[www.idenetwork.org](http://www.idenetwork.org)**

**Research in Practice** - this website has some excellent and detailed information and links to a range of other resources and sources of information. The following document specifically deals with young people and participation: Research in Practice (2006) Young People's Participation. Quality Protects Research Briefing No 3 (**[www.rip.org.uk/publications/documents/QPB/QPRB3.asp](http://www.rip.org.uk/publications/documents/QPB/QPRB3.asp)** last accessed 15 June 2006). Research in Practice is the largest children and families research implementation project in England and Wales. It is a department of The Dartington Hall Trust run in collaboration with the Association of Directors of Social Services, The University of Sheffield and a wider network of participating agencies in the UK.

**Youth.ie** - provides some good resources, including a set of links to other materials which focus upon aspects related to consulting with a range of different groups of young people with varied needs and interests.

**[www.youth.ie/download/hear/13.pdf](http://www.youth.ie/download/hear/13.pdf)**

# other useful links & resources

**Schools Councils UK** - site to help support the development of democratically elected groups of students who represent their peers and enable pupils to become partners in their own education.

[www.schoolcouncils.org](http://www.schoolcouncils.org)

**The Citizenship Foundation** - offers information to empower individuals to engage in the wider community.

[www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk](http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk)

**Being Heard** - a site run by the Hansard Society aiming to increase participation in the parliamentary process. Through the Citizenship Education programme, it works with young people and schools to support the citizenship curriculum and provide information resources about engagement and participation. The 'Infobase' section gathers information, news and explanations of key political issues, whilst the 'Action Centre' offers young people the opportunity to take action and to be heard.

[beingheard.org.uk/content](http://beingheard.org.uk/content)

**Students as Researchers** - this site contains student accounts of their findings and experiences as researchers. Also contains teacher accounts of implementing a students-as-researchers approach in schools and associated resource materials.

[www.studentsasresearchers.nexus.edu.au/pagesetup.html](http://www.studentsasresearchers.nexus.edu.au/pagesetup.html)

**Working Together: Giving Young People a Say** - a Department for Education and Skills (DfES) document which provides guidance on what the Government believes participation in schools should mean.

[www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/conResults.cfm?consultationId=1222](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/conResults.cfm?consultationId=1222)

**Opening Education: Social Software and Learning** - a Futurelab publication looking at the potential of social software for learning, providing an easy-to-use guide with common terms.

[www.futurelab.org.uk/research/opening\\_education.htm](http://www.futurelab.org.uk/research/opening_education.htm)

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# Futurelab

Futurelab is passionate about transforming the way people learn. Tapping into the huge potential offered by digital and other technologies, we are developing innovative learning resources and practices that support new approaches to education for the 21st century.

Working in partnership with industry, policy and practice, Futurelab:

- incubates new ideas, taking them from the lab to the classroom
- offers hard evidence and practical advice to support the design and use of innovative learning tools
- communicates the latest thinking and practice in educational ICT
- provides the space for experimentation and the exchange of ideas between the creative, technology and education sectors.

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