

Student Voice as a Tool of Assessment in Higher Education and an Essential Element of  
the Democratic Classroom

Veronica Scheidler

Colorado State University

Winter School 2018



**GRADUATE SCHOOL**  
**COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY**

## Table of Contents

Summary.....	3
Introduction .....	4
Chapter I: Student Voice in an International Context .....	5
Chapter II: Student Voice in the United States.....	8
Student Voice as Summative Evaluation: History and Critiques .....	8
Student Voice as Formative Evaluation in the Democratic Classroom.....	9
Chapter III: Discussion.....	12
Research Question 1: How is student voice solicited? .....	12
Research Question 2: How do economics influence student voice? .....	13
Conclusion.....	15
References .....	16

## Summary

Student voice gained prominence in the United States in the 1960s. The civil rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam War also led students to consider their dissatisfaction with higher education. By the end of the 1960s, almost every U.S. university had instituted systems—typically course surveys—that allowed their students to evaluate their courses and instructors. Since, researchers and educators have been further exploring and experimenting with how students can offer their unique perspective to improve educational practices. This essay reviews the history of student voice and observes its application through the lens of the human resources management model of education model and the concept of students-as-consumers of higher education and the lens of the democratic-emancipatory model that takes a more humanistic approach to pedagogy and curriculum. It further examines the uses and critiques of student evaluation surveys and concept related to making classrooms democratic spaces.

**Keywords:** *Student voice, democratic classroom, higher education, students as consumers*

## **Introduction**

Student voice is a term that has been used to capture a wide array of theories and practices rooted in the notion that students can provide valuable input about their education. While student surveys have been present in some universities within the United States since the 1920s (Darwin, 2016), in recent decades researchers and critics have begun to critically acknowledge absence of student perspectives in making educational decisions (Cook-Sather, 2006). Educators and reformers consider the question, “What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?” (Fullan, 1991, p. 171). This consideration has prompted pressure for greater student feedback in educational matters, and from these reform efforts, the term “student voice” was born (Cook-Sather, 2006).

However, the concept of student voice is not without its problems. While the term encapsulates the concept that learners possess valuable insights that could improve the educational experience, how to solicit student voice and institute the changes requested by students requires concerted effort and is difficult to effectively put into practice. One reason for this difficulty is the power differential that inherently exists between teacher and student (Brookfield, 2006; Cook-Sather, 2006). As a result of the power differences between students and professors and the authority of the academy, it can be a struggle for student voice to change policies and practice. Fielding (2004) writes of student voice advocates: “however committed they may be, will not of themselves achieve their aspiration unless a series of conditions are met that provide the organizational structures and cultures to make their desired intentions a living reality” (p. 202). Giving student voice authority in higher education requires fundamental changes in the dynamics of higher education institutions; however, the popularity and pressure to include student voices in decision-making of colleges and universities is increasing – particularly in United States, Canada, Australia, and United Kingdom (Darwin, 2016).

This essay will address how colleges and universities in the United States are applying the concept of student voice and the challenges faced. Additionally, it will consider how student voice fits into the aims of two educational models: democratic-emancipatory education and human resources management education. While these models have diverse objectives, both can work together to play a role in shaping education and will be introduced in the next chapter.

The following chapters will strive to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: How is student voice solicited?

RQ 2: How do economics influence student voice?

## **Chapter I: Student Voice in an International Context**

As discussed in the introduction, student voice has various interpretations within the lexicon of higher education. The most pervasive and institutionalized form student voice is the end-of-semester, quantitative survey administered to students at the end of a course. The United States was an early adopter of this type student feedback survey having pioneered its use in the 1920s; however, in the last three decades, student feedback surveys have become a standard and respected gauge of teacher quality in colleges in Universities in the U.S., U.K, and Australia (Darwin, 2016). However, the use of an end-of-course survey of an instrument of student voice begs the question: what is meant by the use of the word “voice?” Is it simply the chance to express a point of view or is it an involved act of participation (Hadfield & Haw, 2001). This is a question that instructors and higher education institutions must ask themselves and can help define the difference between student voice defined through impersonal surveys and student voice as something that influence classroom direction.

While course surveys may be the most frequently discussed application of student voice in the research, educators and researchers in the United States are evolving student voice from a summative review of a course and striving to incorporate student input regularly throughout the instructional course. This view of student voice in higher education serves to promote the ideals of democratic-emancipatory education. Nouri and Sajjadi (2014) summarize the aims of democratic-emancipatory education as “manifestation of humanization, critical conscientization, and a problem-posing education system” they further attest that implementing an emancipatory pedagogy requires a “negotiated curriculum based on true dialogue that value social interaction, collaboration, authentic democracy, and self-actualization” (p. 77).

However, the ideals of democratic education and emancipatory pedagogy are often secondary to the “human capital” view of education that has gained increasing prominence with the rise of neoliberalism in the United States and the world. The “knowledge society” or “knowledge economy” has replaced industrial economy with major implications for education, particularly that institutional education is becoming more necessary to secure employment (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The educational implications are compounded by neoliberalism’s implicit emphasis on individual responsibility (Lima & Guimarães, 2011). Workers are facing increasing pressure to have higher education credentials to remain competitive in the marketplace. This has led to a sharp rise in older adults enrolling in colleges. According to the United States’ National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2015 adults aged 25 or older accounted for over 40 percent of the college population with 8.1 million of 19.9 total enrollments (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). The reasons older adults cite for returning to colleges and universities often include pursuing additional training to qualify for high skilled jobs and increasing their long-term economic prospects (Brennan, 2012; Seftor & Turner, 2002).

Neoliberalist policies and the emergence of the knowledge society have in many ways made education a consumer good where a student obtains marketable skills in exchange for tuition. This expectation that a degree from a college or university will yield economic benefits can drive an assessment culture where students evaluate instructors, programs, and institutions based on the expectations they had upon enrolling. In the United States, there exists a hierarchy of colleges and universities, and Best Colleges Rankings are provided every year by *U.S. News & World Report*. The yearly rankings include “Best National College”, “Best Value School.” New in their 2018 rankings, *U.S. News & World Report* is including postgraduates’ salary data on the pages for each school (Morse, & Brooks, 2017). While the report is compiled based mostly on quantitative student outcomes and not student evaluation, the existence and popularity of this college rankings list underscores how rampant assessment culture is within the higher education system in the U.S.

It also becomes prudent to discuss how the cost of tuition influences the idea that higher education is a consumer good. Jerrim and Macmillan (2016), in their international study of income inequality and economic mobility across generations, note that nations with high income inequality among their populations tend to have better economic returns to obtaining university education. University graduates in the U.S. can expect to make twice as much money in their lifetime as those who do not attend a university, while those with university education in Canada, Belgium, Ireland and the U.K. can expect to make 60 percent more with university credentials. Additionally, Jerrim and Macmillan note that many countries with high income inequality tend to have higher per annum tuition costs, often exceeding \$USD 6000. In the United States, the cost of attending college is even more inflated. The NCES (2016) reports that for the 2014-15 academic year the average cost of tuition, fees, room, and board for full-time undergraduate students was \$USD 21,728. The considerable cost of higher education in some nations supports the idea that education is a consumer good rather than a public good and open to the scrutiny of the consumer, which is often seen in through student feedback.

Recent increases to tuition costs in the U.K. have led the nation to institutionalize student feedback and give it increased weight in judging the value of a university. Student evaluations have become embedded in the U.K.’s education policy alongside the introduction and continuing increases of tuition (Freeman, 2016). The government has outlined plans to allow universities to charge more tuition should their teaching be deemed high enough quality. This quality may be measured by a variety of factors, notably the “student experience” and postgraduate income (Viña, 2016, May 12). This policy move further makes student assessment a mechanism of higher education as a consumer good.

Nonetheless, democratic-emancipatory model of education is still concerned with assessment and outcome, though its outcomes are not necessarily measured in economic returns but social and personal gains. However, in a democratic classroom, student voice and feedback are a part of every learning session. When democratic education is employed well, learners become co-creators of their learning experience. Lima and Guimarães (2011) outline the

political priorities of democratic-emancipatory education as working “to build a democratic and participatory society by means of a fundamental social right: education” (p. 42). To apply this priority to college education, it should teach students how to participate in and critically examine their society. This can be demonstrated by making the classroom a microcosm of active participation. Educator and social activist bell hooks (2003) advocates the concept of “radical openness” in the classroom. She defines the concept as “the will to explore different perspectives and to change one’s mind as new information is presented” (p. 48). hooks recognizes that instructors are the individuals who must institute radical openness in their classroom.

Democratic-emancipatory and human resources management education do not have to exist as completely isolated and separate models of education. Elements of both models can work together to provide students in higher education settings with the most out of their education. However, taken individually, each of the models lends itself to different modes of student voice. In the following chapter, student voice in higher education will be explored through the two different practices described in this introduction – student voice as a summative assessment, typically expressed through a survey, and student voice as tool for negotiating the curricula and direction of a course.

## Chapter II: Student Voice in the United States

The previous chapter explored the democratic-emancipatory and human resources management models of education and how each model may impact the way student voice is practiced. In this section, student voice as a means of assessment will be explored followed by student voice as a formative means of influencing classroom instruction within the context of the United States. A course may incorporate student voice in making daily classroom decisions and also rely course surveys; however, there are distinct characteristics, strengths, and criticisms of each of these exercises of student voice.

### *Student Voice as Summative Evaluation: History and Critiques*

While informal and formal methods of student evaluation are believed to have existed since the dawn of teaching, the modern appearance of student evaluation is tied to two activities in that occurred in the U.S. in the 1920s. In 1924, the University of Washington introduced student ratings, and in 1925, Purdue published a study on the design of student ratings. Nonetheless, a study from 1961 concluded that only 24% of U.S. higher education institutions were regularly using a quantitative student evaluation (Darwin, 2016). However, in the late 1960s, in the wake of a democratic awakening in the midst of the Vietnam War student began protesting their government and their rights to have a say within higher education institutions. Darwin (2016) writes:

Rising levels of student dissatisfaction with US intervention in the Vietnam War and support for gender and race-based liberation movements generated militant and well-organized student movements. The development of these student organizations, predicated on a range of democratic struggles, inevitably also turned their attention to the form and quality of the education university students were experiencing during this period. (Darwin, 2016, p. 4)

The student movements were immensely successful and student evaluations systems were present in nearly all U.S. universities by the end of the 1960s. The mass introduction of student evaluation was hasty and met with some pushback and uncertainty including from within higher educational institutions. Some feared that it would lead to the “imminent arrival of intellectual hedonism” (Darwin, 2016, p. 6). However, overall the widespread use of student feedback gave credence and legitimacy to student voice as a means of improving instruction in colleges and universities.

To fast forward to the present decade, where in the U.S., student outcomes are the main determinant of whether a higher education institution is successful. Student feedback has become increasingly important to achieving student outcomes as universities strive to reduce dropout rates and have their students graduate as well as provide learning opportunities that make their students attractive to employers and graduate-level programs (Padró, 2011). In helping universities to improve student outcomes, student voice has gained increased legitimacy. So much so that in the U.S., often faculty members’ promotion or tenure is



dependent on receiving positive teaching evaluation from students (Kelly-Woessner & Woessner, 2006).

In a case study by Padró (2011), an important question is asked about the role of student feedback in the evaluation of instructors: “What is the role of student evaluations on instruction? Formative – focusing on diagnostics and continuous improvement – or summative in scope leading toward staffing decisions?” (p. 37). Unfortunately, with student evaluations typically administered at the end of a course, they tend toward the summative. According to Pallet (2006), the diagnostic potential of student ratings is not often realized for varied reasons including the focus on the summative component, the difficulty in creating reliable and valid student ratings forms, and the need for support and mentoring based on recommendations from student feedback.

The concern over how valid student evaluations are has gained increased attention from researchers in the past few decades. As the student-as-consumer idea has increased the power of student voice to affect university staffing decisions, the factors that influence positive and negative reviews are being carefully considered. The weight that student evaluations hold in deciding the teaching quality has required academics to become more “user-friendly” in order to maintain levels of student satisfaction (Freeman, 2016, p. 861) and to better manage the expectation of students in their course (Cook-Sather, 2011). The darker side of student evaluations shows that students generally provide lower ratings to professors who espouse different political views and higher ratings to those who hold similar political views (Kelly-Woessner & Woessner, 2006). Also, the scores that students give teachers on evaluations are often correlated with the students’ grade expectations, and the instructor’s gender, ethnicity, and age play a role in the scores they receive on evaluations (Stark & Freishtat, 2014), with it being argued that student evaluations are biased against female instructors (Boring, Ottoboni, & Stark, 2016).

Ultimately, student voice, as practiced through course evaluation surveys, has served to amplify student opinion. In the U.S. where education is treated most commonly as a consumer good, evaluations measure satisfaction and ease of participation in a college course and even influence an instructor’s chance at promotion. These student evaluations do not necessarily improve teaching unless instructors have support and mentorship.

#### *Student Voice as Formative Evaluation in the Democratic Classroom*

The critique that student evaluations fail to improve teaching without a concerted effort on behalf of the instructor to address specific issues in their pedagogy can be combatted by making student feedback formative and present throughout the instruction of a course. An example of a formative program that values and supports student voice and instructor improvement is Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) at Bryn Mawr College and Haverford College (Cook-Sather, 2011). The SaLT program provides a lot of support and is well-established. However, the shift toward formative evaluation and incorporating student voice into teaching decisions throughout the semester may also be made at the individual

level by instructors who are committed to honoring student voice and establishing classrooms as democratic spaces. Individual commitment to regularly soliciting student input allowing that input to shape curricular decisions, helps foster a classroom that furthers the goals of the democratic-emancipatory model, but also develops student responsibility towards meeting personal learning objectives.

At Bryn Mawr University, the SaLT program evolves the standard of student voice as an assessment tool by recruiting, training, and paying undergraduate students to act as student consultants to members of the faculty. Students and faculty choose to participate in the program of their own volition and may choose to be a part of the program for a variety of reasons. Once a faculty member and a student consultant are paired, they meet to discuss their collaboration and the semester's focus. The student is not enrolled in the course for which they serve as consultant, yet the student weekly attends at least one course taught by the faculty member and meets with the faculty member to discuss the observation and other relevant feedback.

The SaLT program challenges norms of professional development within universities that include “neither the premise that students have unique perspectives on learning and teaching and should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education (Cook-Sather, 2006b) nor the premise that we have ‘an ethical obligation to involve our students more actively [in faculty development]’ (Zahorski, quoted in Cox & Sorenson, 2000, p. 98)” (Cook-Sather, 2011, p. 222). The SaLT program provides instructors with a perspective into their class that colleagues cannot provide. Additionally, while some student consultants initially question what they will be able to contribute as “just a student” (Cook-Sather, 2011, p. 222), the SaLT program's commitment to supporting dialogue helps to overcome the barrier created by the difference of power that exists between student and university professor. Perhaps, the fact that the student consultant is not enrolled in their faculty collaborator's course, where the faculty member would have the power of assigning them a grade, helps to mitigate the impact of the power differential. Cook-Sather (2011) concludes that as a result of the student-faculty partnerships and dialogue forged through SaLT “both faculty and students begin to see the responsibility for exploring and improving teaching and learning as shared” (Cook-Sather, 2011, p. 228).

The SaLT program demonstrates a huge institutional commitment to giving the student voice authority and providing instructors with the resources to learn about their teaching and adapt their practice based on the feedback of someone with a student perspective. However, instructors do not need to have an institutional program at their disposal to utilize student voice as a formative means of evaluating their teaching. Brookfield (2006) recommends using a weekly classroom assessment form. The one he uses takes students about five minutes for students to complete, and it is handed out at the end of the last class he has with students each week. The students complete the form anonymously and the responses are shared with the group at the next class. Brookfield elaborates:

Its purpose is not to ask students what they liked or didn't like about the class (though that information inevitably emerges). Instead it gets them to focus on specific events and actions that are engaging, distancing, confusing, or helpful. Having this highly concrete information about particular events is much more useful than reading a general statement of preferences. (Brookfield, 2006, p. 9).

The use of a tool like a weekly questionnaire requires some extra time of an instructor to read and synthesize student input. However, it allows a teacher to use student voice to tailor the curriculum and pedagogy style to the needs their classes. Brookfield (2006) is clear that he believes being responsive to student voice does not automatically mean surrendering to the will of the student majority. He writes: "I will not abandon my agenda regarding the teaching of critical thinking; that's why I am in the classroom. But I do negotiate how students demonstrate such thinking if the assignments I have set are dissonant with their learning style, personality, or cultural formation" (Brookfield, 2006, p. 9).

Brookfield's (2006) approach to student voice in the classroom encapsulates much of what is important in the democratic-emancipatory model of education with his focus on critical thinking coupled with the openness of students may demonstrate their knowledge proficiency. However, he also acknowledges the goals of the human resources management model of education. He notes that if students are aware that they need certain skills to pass a test, get a job, obtain a licensure, etc. they need a teacher with credibility and experience in the subject matter, and being authentic or charming is no substitute for being knowledgeable.

While summative evaluations remain a fixture and reliably present means of soliciting input from the student voice in the U.S., the practice is rife with criticisms about its validity. Developing means to engage with student voice throughout a course provides greater opportunity to be responsive and improve teaching practice. However, the interest and responsibility for moving beyond end-of-course surveys and drawing out student voice throughout a course lies with the instructor.

### Chapter III: Discussion

The previous chapters of this essay sought to establish a basis and framework for understanding how student voice is used in American higher education and its strengths and weaknesses. The purpose of this chapter is to revisit the research questions posed in the introduction to connect the ideas in the previous chapter as well as suggest best practices and suggestions for further inquiry.

#### *Research Question 1: How is student voice solicited?*

In higher education institutions across the United States, student voice is most pervasively present through quantitative surveys assessing the quality of a class and teacher. In practice, college instructors can provide greater opportunities for students to share their insights, experiences, and suggestions for improvement throughout a course by being open to feedback and even soliciting on a regular basis as Brookfield (2006) does with his weekly questionnaires. Higher education institutions can give greater weight to student voice by implementing programs empowering students to recognize the value of their student perspective as the SaLT program does and Bryn Mawr and Haverford College (Cook-Sather, 2011).

As has been explored in this essay, there exists a good deal of criticism over the efficacy of the end-of-course qualitative survey in providing meaningful feedback and actually improving teacher quality. While these student surveys now deeply entrenched into the faculty evaluation systems at most American colleges and universities, they can certainly be improved. Additionally, they should not be the only manner in which student input is collected. Collecting data on the student experience at the end of the course can provide feedback that may benefit future classes, but the next group of learners may not have all the same needs. One great benefit of the SaLT program is that students who take on roles as consultants to faculty say they feel more empowered to speak up more frequently in their own classes.

It is largely up to the institution and individual teachers to establish an environment where learners feel welcome to voice concerns and offer contributions to the direction of the course. Davis and Arend (2013) contend that much of teacher evaluation is predicated on judging the quality of teaching and not the *l* of learning. They authored a guide to teaching that challenges existing higher educational paradigms in the U.S.—most notably the preeminence of teaching through lecture—by outlining seven different ways of facilitating learning. Davis and Arend’s exploration of the cultural foundations of the lecture’s rise to prominence in colleges coincides with the idea that higher education teaching paradigm may be built mostly upon Western ideals (Scheurich & Young, 1997). Creating a learning environment where student voice is sought out helps to create the conditions for building better systems of teaching that are based on pluralism—exploring different epistemologies, learning styles, and how students make *meaning* out of their experiences. Though, it is important to distinguish pluralism for diversity. Simmer-Brown (2003) writes:

Diversity is a fact of modern life—especially in America. There are tremendous differences in our communities—ethnically, racially, religiously. Diversity suggests the fact of such differences. Pluralism, on the other hand, is a commitment to communicate with and relate to the larger world—with a very different neighbor, or distant community”(Simmer Brown quoted in hooks, 2003, p. 47).

Despite the diversity of the U.S., the faculty in colleges and universities is not particularly diverse. A report compiled by Synder, de Brey, and Dillow (2016) concludes that 78% of instructional faculty in post-secondary institutions are white, with 43% of the total number being white males and 35% being white females. This lack of representation of the nation’s diversity has led to what Scheurich and Young (1997) call “epistemological racism” within the academy which “besides unnecessarily restricting or excluding the range of possible epistemologies, creates profoundly negative consequences for those of other racial cultures with different epistemologies” (pp. 8-9). These conditions make the call for student voice—for all students’ voices—more important. When there is consistent dialogue and what hooks (2003) calls “radical openness” this is an opportunity to expand what and how the university teaches. However, achieving radical openness means going beyond the survey to make college classrooms spaces for critical thinking, exploration, and self-discovery that prepares students to live their best lives as well as contribute to the economy.

#### *Research Question 2: How do economics influence student voice?*

Much of this essay has explored two different approaches to education: the democratic-emancipatory model and the human resources management model. The democratic-emancipatory model has roots in humanistic ideas and public good. The human resources management model is closely related to the neoliberal ideas of individual responsibility in society and support the idea of education as a consumer good (Lima & Guimarães, 2011). Jarvis (2002) addresses the changing nature of citizenship in the age of neoliberal globalization and asserts that as education reinforces the dominant culture, it is becoming increasingly influenced by global markets. He argues that as the market has become global, individuals have been recast as consumers rather than citizens (p. 8). He also explores the notion of "corporate citizenship" positing that employees "are paid and educated to be active citizens in furthering the corporate mission, while they might well remain passive and private citizens in the public sphere" (p. 11).

This view certainly has an impact on higher education and the impact and import of student voice. It is in this neoliberal, globalized environment that the current system of student evaluation through an end-of-course satisfaction survey has developed a strong foothold. Further, it serves to explain the culture within the United States for ranking colleges on factors ranging from how much their graduates make to how many students from each freshman class graduate with a four-year degree. As stated earlier, higher education is seen largely as a consumer good, and student voice often serves as a means of expressing their satisfaction with a service—in this case the service is a university course—as they might

rate a restaurant or movie. This has its merit, and just because education is shifting toward a consumer good does not mean that it cannot provide humanistic education that also meets the aims of the democratic-emancipatory model; however, students and educators should examine their ideas of civic engagement and social participation.

In the U.S. college is often seen as a gateway to greater earning potential over one's lifetime. As stated earlier, in the U.S., a university graduate can expect to make twice as much as someone with only a high school education. In this environment where university education serves principally to prepare students for the workforce, student voice may be used in helping students to reach the economic goals they have rather than explore topics for their own sake. In discussing teacher authenticity versus credibility, Brookfield (2006) writes:

If learners know they need to develop specific skills or understand certain concepts in order to pass an exam, gain licensure, begin a new career, get out of unemployment, and so on, a teacher with authenticity but no credibility creates great frustration. This is an uncomfortable contradiction for learners to experience. (Brookfield, 2006, p. 6)

Brookfield outlines many qualities that make an authentic teacher including responsiveness. His argument that authenticity without credibility creates tension in classroom is logical, but also makes sense in a social environment where students may be looking to gain a specific bit of knowledge rather than offer comments, opinions, on the topic and teaching style. However, Brookfield argues that in all teaching there must be a balance.

## **Conclusion**

Student voice is very present in U.S. higher education, but the quality, validity and frequency of the solicitation of student voice deserves harsh scrutiny. Student voice, as conceived through end-of-course student evaluations, is especially fraught with controversy. Studies indicate student evaluations may be biased and that they do not necessarily lead to teaching improvement. Also, as this sort of survey comes at the conclusion of a course rather than during the instruction, the students offering feedback do not have the chance to benefit from adaptation the teacher makes based on the survey results. If student evaluation is going to be used to improve teaching in colleges and universities, it needs to go beyond surveys and evolve into dialogue and partnerships between students, teachers, and mentors.

Additionally, higher education institutions and individual instructors could benefit by evaluating their approach to education, and recognizing the role that student voice plays in meeting the aims of the educational model to which they ascribe. Students may play different roles based on whether they are a consumer of education that intends to leverage their degree for economic gain, a scholar intent on making a life in the academy, a social activist hoping to give theoretical backing to their convictions, or a combination of these archetypes. Providing more opportunities for students with a wide range of backgrounds and goals can make the university a more pluralistic and engaging institution and elevate teachers' pedagogical responsiveness and skill.

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