We're All In This Together: Students as Partners in Teaching and Learning

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OPINION PIECE

“We’re all in this together”
Students as Partners in Teaching and Learning

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Opinion

The current overused aphorism “We are all in this together”, could describe Students as Partners (SaP) initiatives intended to empower students to shape their teaching and learning experience. However, ‘first among equals’ meaning persons who are formally equal to other group members, but whose position in hierarchy affords them additional influence, may be a more accurate description of the teacher’s role in SaP initiatives. The following opinion piece is offered as a reflection on my multi-year analysis (2013-2019) of the corpus of open-ended comments that students add in the Irish Survey of Student Engagement.

Listening to the student voice?

The ‘student as partner’ (SaP) role, key to transforming power relations in higher education (HE), is normally enacted by student representatives on institutional boards. However, some have questioned the legitimacy of the ‘chosen few’ to represent a wider, increasingly diverse, student population. Research has found that student representatives find the committee environment to be an intimidating space in which to air their concerns, especially when the students’ tutors, who assess their work, are present. Students observe that debate in this context is stymied and discussion about teaching performance is often prohibited, perhaps as a result of a cultural unambiguous hierarchy that places tutors above students. Meanwhile, the bulk of the students, ‘the many’ who do not occupy representative roles, are limited to having their views heard through national surveys, feedback often only benefiting those students who come after them.

The voices that matter?

While the rationale for listening to the student voice is presented as part of a quality assurance agenda, HE can be selective when hearing voices, often focusing on those forms of voice that have an external currency. However, student voice is premised on delivering a just and equitable HE that breaks the
cycle of social and cultural disadvantage. The diversity of experience among the student body creates now an even greater imperative to ensure all their voices are heard, and their concerns responded too.

Although rarely referred to in SaP terms, there exists a forum that potentially gives voice to the multiplicity of views and experiences of an increasingly diverse Irish HE student cohort. The annual mandatory Irish Survey of Student Engagement invites first and final year undergraduate and taught postgraduate students to share their engagement experiences. The results of this national quantitative survey are published annually, the engagement indicators often functioning as proxies for institutional quality.

However, the survey also invites students to share ‘what is best’ and ‘what could improve’ about how their institutions engage them. 50% of all respondents at the end of a 67 question survey take the time to answer the two open-ended questions, an indication of the students’ willingness to, and interest in, providing feedback to institutions.

The anonymity afforded students in this online survey allows them to speak candidly about their teaching and learning experiences. Detailed analysis of the national student comments by the author reveal student engagement in Irish HE is inextricably linked to the context in which their learning happens, the classroom, the place where relations of power are most in evidence.

**Testing relationships?**

Students’ comments, reflecting the affective relational aspects of teaching, emphasise the pivotal role that approachable, available, enthusiastic, knowledgeable lecturers/tutors, leveraging interactive pedagogies, play in their active engagement. Crucially however, they consistently identify assessment as the aspect of their experience that is most in need of improvement. Students highlight the lack of explicit assessment criteria and timely or detailed feedback on assignments and exams: they crave guidance that will help to improve their performance.

The comments provide sobering evidence of students’ capacity to critique and evaluate teaching and learning and provide a counter narrative to those who question students’ capacity to do so. Particularly striking are the comments that identify as ‘best’ those teachers who ‘encourage’ or ‘allow’ questions in class. This highlights the minimal expectations that students have to exercise agency in their learning. This is further supported in the ‘What could improve’ comments that document teaching approaches that are didactic, transmissive and based on a deficit view of students.

**Shared understanding?**

The consistency of student comments across institutions, disciplines and programmes provide evidence that students in Irish HE have a shared understanding of what engages them. Yet these
authentic and insightful student voice comments are not analysed at a national level: rather, they are returned to individual institutions for local analysis. The concerns that students raise are only assessed, and therefore only dealt with, at a local level, despite that they may suggest systemic issues which need to be addressed nationally. The detail of the comments is available only to the ‘chosen few’ and normally dealt with by those responsible for quality assurance and Teaching and Learning. Rarely, in my experience, do these comments reach those in a position to act upon them, the teachers themselves, the sharing of this information perhaps governed by tacit ‘need to know’ attitudes. Apart from the pedagogical imperative to reflect on our teaching, there is a moral imperative to not only listen to what students, in their own words, have to say, but to ensure that the valuable feedback, much of which is complimentary and supportive of excellent teaching, is shared with teachers themselves.