Conceptualising student voice in UK higher education: Four theoretical lenses

Conceptualising student voice in UK higher education: Four theoretical lenses.

The 'student voice' is highly profiled in UK higher education, yet highly under-theorised. Over the past 20 years UK universities have gone from a taxpayer-funded, free at the point of use model, to one supported through tuition fees via Government-backed loans. Subsequently, there is a growth of discourse about universities as businesses and students as paying customers/ consumers whose opinions and demands must be considered. This article outlines four possible theoretical lenses (or frameworks) through which student voice can be analysed, enabling an exploration of the vested interests and power relations entailed. These lenses draw on 1) Research on student voice and power in compulsory education; 2) Regulatory capture from Economics 3) The notion of students voice as part of an incomplete whole and 4) non-representational theory, developed in Human Geography by Nigel Thrift.

Keywords: student voice; student engagement; regulatory capture; Non-representational theory, participation

Introduction

In her review of student voice work in higher education Seale (2009) rightly acknowledges that understanding of student voice in higher education is undeveloped, especially when compared to student voice in compulsory education. To those of us working in higher education the whole notion of 'the student voice' is presented as being important to the functioning of the university, often in a quality assurance and quality enhancement context; this 'consumer panel' conception of student voice has clear resonance with the idea of the university as a business and the student as the customer. Ruddock (2006, 133) calls this 'A zeitgeist commitment to voice alongside a concern for client and stakeholder interests'. Crowley (2012, 19-21), places her work on children's voices in the context of the 'consumer citizen', a concept she places on the shift over the past two decades from government to *governance;* rather than governing through hierarchical control the Government works in partnership with a variety of diverse actors from the public, private and voluntary sectors. This process of governance, in theory at least, involves a greater emphasis on listening to the voice of service users. In UK universities the most notable policy change has been the move from a system of centralised Government funding for free university education plus means-tested grants for living expenses through to the current system of tuition fees (up to £9,000 in England) and government-supported loans which students repay over the course of their working life. Over the past 20 years there has been an ever growing discourse of the university as a business and students as paying customers whose voice needs to be heard if universities are to be successful (see Collini 2012).

The relationship between 'student voice' and the relatively new to the UK notion of 'student engagement' (Trowler 2010, 3) also obscures our understanding of student voice. Arguments, beyond the scope of this paper, could be advanced that

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student voice is a component of student engagement, that student engagement is part of

the student voice or that 'student engagement' is essentially a synonym for 'student

voice'. 'Students as producers' (Neary and Winn 2009) and 'students as partners'

(HEA 2014) initiatives could be considered as coming under the umbrella of 'student

voice' or 'student engagement'.Gourlay (2015, 403-404) critiques the notion of student

engagement through what she calls 'the tyranny of participation' in which only public

and observable forms of behaviour are viewed as legitimate engagement behaviour. The

National Student Survey (NSS) is used in university/ subject ranking tables as a

quantifiable expression of the student voice concerning the student experience. The

prospect of the NSS become a component of England's proposed Teaching Excellence

Framework (TEF) will only give further impetuous to its status as the student voice is

linked to judgements about the quality of teaching (Department for Business,

Innovation and Skills 2016).

My own understanding of student voice is very broad. I not only understand

student voice to be plural (students' voices) but also that certain student voices are not

always heard or articulated. Student voice encompasses everything to the feedback

students give universities through formal and informal structures, staff-student

partnerships, through to campaigning and protest.

This article outlines four theoretical 'lenses' through which the student voice

might be analysed (though overlapping characteristics, and myriad alternative

perspectives are possible). I believe they each contribute towards the possibility of what

Seale (2009, 1000) conceives as 'the meaningful transformation, participation and

empowerment' aspiration of work on student voice in higher education. Although the

examples used are from the UK higher education professional and policy context, the

reader should be able to apply the lenses to other higher education contexts.

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The first entitled 'Appropriating the student voice' can be seen as a continuation of

Seale's work in drawing on student voice theory from the compulsory school sector.

The remaining three lenses draw their inspiration from literature outside education.

The second lens is that of regulatory capture whereby organisations and individuals

create a situation of complicity so that the regulator becomes unable or unwilling to act

in the interests of the group it is supposed to represent—this theory derives from

economics. The third lens takes on a more philosophical bent through considering the

ephemeral and serendipitous nature of the capturing the student voice. The fourth lens

draws upon the practice/ praxis work of Nigel Thrift's non-representational theory

(NRT) with its origins in Human Geography. NRT provides a focus on what actually

physically and geographically *happens* bringing us away from a 'normative' view of

student voice and towards a performance-orientated perspective of student voice in

action.

1.   Appropriating the student voice

Student voice in compulsory schooling is a useful starting point for thinking about

student voice in higher education. Firstly, the student voice literature is better developed

and research in comparison with higher education. Secondly, an individual's legal

change of status from school pupil to university student or child to adult does not

automatically produce an immediate shift in how they express their perspectives on

given issues. The change of identity from child to adult is transitional, complex and

varies between individuals (Arnett 2001).

This first approach to theorising the student voice is might be described as the

codification of student voice. The student voice is permitted, even encouraged, but only

in accordance with rules (tacit and non-tacit) set out by a non-student authority.

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Although the idea of 'student voice' is presented as having democratic, participatory and even radical motivations there remain questions about the '…hidden coercion in "voice", whose interests it serves and value of silence' (Bragg 2007, 344). Fielding's exploration of the student voice in compulsory schooling recognises that the student voice can be part of the way school leaders can leverage control:

> Firstly, there is a set of questions about who is allowed to speak; secondly, who listens; thirdly, what skills are required and what support provided for their development; fourth, what attitudes and dispositions are needed to transform skills into meaningful realities; fifth, what systems are needed to sustain this kind of work; sixth, what kinds of organisational culture need to develop to enable student voice to thrive; seventh, what spaces, both physical and metaphorical, are needed for participants to make meaning together; eighth, what are the implications for action; and, finally, what are some of the key considerations to take into account in helping student voice to be and become a significant part of the process of communal renewal (Fielding 2001, 100).

With these 'rules' student voice is codified into the institutional structure of the school or school system. There are set rules on who can engage, when, and which questions they are allowed to ask. Certain engagements are permitted whilst others are strictly off limits (one of the off limits mentioned by Fielding is teaching and learning). Boundaries and perimeters are set around which topics are legitimate concerns for the students and which topics are non- negotiable. Not only does the school leadership set the rules of engagement, but they may also control and restrict who is allowed to speak, and who gets listened to. There may also be restrictions as to whom a student is permitted to speak—the students do not necessarily have the right or ability to speak to the people who are in a position of power to make changes that may be demanded. Students then depend upon certain individuals, probably more junior staff members who then have to take the student voice to an authority with sufficient scope to affect change. Foucault

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(1977, 222) regards these 'micro-power' systems as the 'dark side of formal, codified

egalitarian processes in politics and law. Institutions, whether schools, prisons, the

army, factories or legal systems require clear hierarchies, rules in observing, surveilling

(and thereby disciplining) individuals (pp. 210-211).

The organisational structure of universities can also set boundaries for the limits

of the student voice. Student data is often received by and analysed by central planning

units. Findings are not necessarily conveyed to the academic departments which may be

able to affect change. In contrast the staff-student committee might be 'owned' by

academic departments which control or filter the flow of information to the wider

university. The university is a disciplinary machine into which the 'student voice' is

incorporated as an element. 'Discipline…', Foucault notes, 'is an art of rank, a technique

for the transformation of arrangements' (1977, 144). Rather than a 'check' on the

disciplinary apparatus, student voice is a fundamental element of the operation of

discipline.

The NSS is often presented as the public end of the student voice through

feedback which informs the reputation of universities (Gibbs 2010). This leads to

university doing their own NSS style internal surveys to pre-empt issues which may

impact in their NSS scores. The content of such internal surveys varies, but they can be

anything from NSS clones to more sophisticated approaches like the Student

Satisfaction Survey which covers a wide range of issues and enables students to state

the importance they attach to particular factors (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield

2007). University management therefore focuses on the aspects of student voice which

have external currency.

In order to go 'off-code' online spaces such as The Student Room[1] or *Which?*
magazine become the places where students views can be expressed about the quality of
accommodation, sports facilities etc. The *Which?* magazine university guide[2] contains
hundreds of open comments on each university on all aspects of their experience.

Student voice researchers in compulsory education (e.g. Fielding 2001, Bragg
2007, Taylor and Robinson 2009) each identify the control exhibited by more powerful
actors in the school setting. For example, a Year 9 student (13-14 years old) involved in
a student voice remarks 'In front of posh people I can talk formally; getting my voice
across' (Bragg 2007, 353). In response Bragg asks if an effective student voice requires
the leaving behind of certain class identities.

Radical pedagogic approaches have been criticised as making '… the
fundamental assumption that power is a possession of a particular group and that it is
wielded 'over' others in more, rather than less, conscious ways' (Taylor and Robinson
2009, 166).   This leads onto the notion of regulatory capture, which may offer an
explanatory framework to explain how power relationships are difficult to identify and
quantify.

2.   Regulatory capture

Regulatory capture is a theory developed by the Economist George Stigler in the 1970's
(see Dal Bó 2006 for a technical overview). Regulatory capture describes the process
whereby a regulatory body set up to protect the public interest is appropriated by the
industry it was set up to regulate. Goldacre (2013) is his popular science book *Bad*

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1   http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk

2   http://university.which.co.uk/

Pharma explains how pharmaceutical companies influence regulatory bodies through close relationships, career movement of staff, working 'with' the regulator, all of which work to ensure that the regulator acts within the interests of the pharmaceutical industry rather than protecting the public; rather than being check and balance on industry it is 'captured' by the industry to serve its purposes. From 2005 there was extensive media coverage of the alleged refusal of National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) to licence the breast cancer drug Herceptin on cost grounds. (Goldacre 2011, loc 3708.) Strangely, the media campaign began before the manufacturer (Roche) had even applied for a licence. Stories centred on breast cancer sufferers being deprived of this ground-breaking treatment emerged. However, the two women who appeared in two-thirds of the articles were 'found' by a PR firm working for the drug's manufacturer. The charity CancerBackup also appeared in the stories, a charity which, incidentally, had received funding from Roche (Wilson et al 2008).

a) Regulatory capture and student voice in national context

Numerous bodies are actors in the UK higher education, not only universities themselves, but the four UK funding councils, the research councils, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) the National Union of Students (NUS) the Office of Fair Access (OFFA) and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) to name a few. While the functions of these bodies may be distinct, the partnerships between these organisations are often very close and staff move between them at the highest levels. Two UK universities are currently led by former Chief Executives of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Another is led by the former Chief Executive of the HEA.

To a certain extent this should be expected. After all it is preferable that those who lead

these organisations should be able to understand the nature of UK universities, and there

can be resistance when a person seen to be an 'outsider' is brought in to play a

leadership role in a university. Partnership is inherently seen as a good thing but Healey

et al (2014) recognise that 'students as partners' is a potential threat to the political

independence of the NUS. 'A partnership approach raises questions about how it is

possible for students' unions to balance this politically orientated role while working in

new ways with their institutions.' (Healey et al 2014, 10). If the students' unions[3] are

the advocates of the student voice at what point does 'students as partners' become

'students as co-conspirators'? Is the 'student voice' silenced by these partnerships? In

theory all these actors in UK higher education ought to be providing checks and

balances, but it is within the interests of the organisations concerned to work together

towards what are perceived as shared goals.

The connections of the NUS to the UK Labour Party (most recently in Government

from 1997-2010) are instructive. Six of the past 24 Presidents of NUS since the late

1960s are or have been Labour MPs. All presidents since 1988 are members or former

members of the Labour Party, although not all were elected on a Labour platform.

Current discourse focuses on the previous Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition

government's (2010-2015) trebling of students fees to £9,000 per year though it was a

Labour Government which first introduced student fees, first at £1,000 (1998) per year

then at £3,000 (2006). Of those former presidents who have not become MPs one is a

Labour Member of the House of Lords, another is married to a Labour MP and others

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3 The terms 'students' unions' is used to here to make a distinction between a) the NUS and

the institution-based 'local' branches of the NUS and b) to include institutional students'

unions which are not affiliated to the national NUS.

are current or former local councillors or employees of the Party. The NUS website

states 'We are students. We are 7 million student voices.' While the NUS is

independent of any political party it is clear that those who lead it at a national level are

not. Two former (Labour) Higher Education ministers are now leaders of universities.

(Baroness) Tessa Blackstone served as Education Minister between 1997-2001 and is

currently Vice-Chancellor at the University of Greenwich and one of her successors,

Bill Rammell (who served 2007-8) is now Vice-Chancellor of the University of

Bedfordshire. Rammell also served as President of the NUS at Cardiff University and

as a regional officer for the NUS. In the 2015 UK General Election Wes Streeting,

NUS President 2008-2010 was elected to the House of Commons as MP for Ilford

North. When Labour's Jim Murphy led the NUS from 1994 to 1996, the NUS dropped

its opposition to students fees and the removal of grants. Murphy was subsequently

elected as a Labour MP in 1997 going on to become a government minister (under Tony

Blair and Gordon Brown) and later a shadow minister before becoming the Labour

Party's leader in Scotland. The NUS executive's decision to end its opposition to fees

went against the position agreed by the NUS conference in 1995. An Early Day Motion

in the UK Parliament signed by 'leftist' members of the Labour Party (including present

leader Jeremy Corbyn) condemned the subsequent suspension of Clive Lewis, the NUS

Vice-President for campaigning against the NUS's new position in a personal capacity.

(EDM 991, 1995-6).

The question then arises if regulatory capture is occurring then who is the 'victim'? As

an overall theory regulatory capture requires there to be an actor whose interests are not

served, usually presented as the 'general public' who lie outside the realm of the

capture. To return to the points made by Bragg (2007, 253) being heard may entail a

change of identity where a student recognises that in exchange of conforming to norms

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their views can be heard.

One approach might be to examine different groups who might be getting the worst outcomes from this system of regulatory capture in universities. The first group of victims are prospective students. There is increasing focus on the supplying the information that prospective students need to make decisions about university choice. There is the Key Information SET (KIS) (HEFCE 2015) which collects data from NSS alongside data on contact hours, exams, housing costs etc. The NSS elements have enough problems of their own, the contact hours variables are also problematic (what constitutes contact) and the coursework to exam ratios are an exact science either (see Gibbs 2010 for a general discussion). In theory the provision of information will enable the student to make an informed choice. However I would concur with Brown that providing students with information and then excusing ourselves of any moral responsibility for the individual student decision is 'immoral' (Brown 2012).

Moten and Harney (2004, 104) go further, maintaining that this is part of what it means to be a customer and universities need students to see themselves as obstacles to society. The second group this capture affects is current and former students. The failure of Universities UK (Vice-Chancellors group) to make any protest about the trebling of university fees is indicative of the capture of universities by Government—after all the impact of student fees on universities, though substantial, affects students all the more. Liverpool VC Howard Newby (himself a former Chief Executive of HEFCE) is among those who have called for the £9,000 cap to be abolished, allowing universities to charge unlimited fees (Paton 2014). Universities are not passive victims of Government policy, and in some cases are actively lobbying Government for policies which do not serve the best interests of most students.

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However a discourse of groups of victims and perpetrators is a crude and inaccurate

representation of how regulatory capture works. Rather there are certain individuals

who are particularly influential agents. They may be university leaders, politicians,

student leaders or heads of government bodies, or in many cases they may have been all

of these over the course of time. A key aspect of regulatory capture is 'revolving door'

capitalism. In his analysis of the role of regulatory capture in the recent economic crisis

Baker (2010, 652) writes of the Wall Street -Washington corridor where Goldman

Sachs employees took up public policy roles in Washington then returned to industry

afterwards.

So how is regulatory capture *allowed* to occur? Two further arguments from Baker can

be developed at this point. The first concerns the political salience of regulation. In the

case of financial markets there is increased public pressure for regulation at present, but

it is difficult to argue this is the case with the way universities operate. Students,

prospective students, trades unions, the NUS and some politicians played a large role in

the protests against the trebling of tuition fees in 2010 but these protests have not be

sustained. As early as October 2010 a YouGov poll found 37% of adults questioned

supported the policy[4] (with 45% opposed and 18% Don't Know.) Returning to

Fielding's (2001) work which relates to compulsory education it is important to

remember most people affected by tuition fees rises are currently children, and do not

yet have a strong political voice.

Secondly the principle that students should contribute to the cost of their higher

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4   YouGov Available online at: http://yougov.co.uk/news/2010/10/15/tuition-fee-opposition/
     (Accessed 18 May 2015)

education seems to have been accepted across the political spectrum (Baker 2010, 653 calls this 'Intellectual and cognitive capture').

b) *Student voice in local contexts*

As in the national context, the role of individuals within particular institutions needs to be considered. Controlling how, where and when the student voice is heard is part of this regulatory control. The purpose to which student voice is put is also instructive on this point. Is the role of student voice to provide a say in the way a university (or course or department) is run? Is the student voice a means of improving quality for university teaching and learning? Is the student voice more about affirming the student experience, e.g. for the purposes of marketing the university to potential students? Why are students motivated to have a voice (or others motivated to engage for some reason)? Are they giving their opinions, developing their relationships or building a power base with the institution (or department or course)? The answer to these questions, is of course, 'it depends'. It could be any of the above, all of the above or none of the above. And those students who don't seem to have a voice—is it because they have nothing to say, no place to say it, or that they want to remain silent?

Drawing on Marx's theories of commodity, Williams (2011, 276) concludes that the use value of an education (in his case mathematics) derives from the learner's 'immediate consumption of education' and their 'enhanced labour power'; a school operating in a 'quasi-market' will provide an education which is in the best interests of the school and not those of the learner. This observation about immediate consumption is an interesting one; student voice can give rise to focus on immediate short-term needs which maximise use value for both universities and students in the longer term.

The NSS feeds into institutional reputation. Universities need a good reputation to

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attract students, but existing students and graduates want to have attended a university

with a good reputation. At a course level student representatives are charged with

bringing the student voice to those who teach on their course, but speaking truth unto

power can be restricted by the desire to maintain good relationships. Students have a

voice in their learning experience but there is some degree of control exerted as they

express their voice to those to who largely have power over them—their teachers who

assess their work and write job references. In the interest of maintaining good

relationships, the voice must sometimes be muted.

3.   The irretrievable student voice: Collecting part of a whole

The two frameworks outlined above focus mainly on the formal mechanisms and

structures of the student voice. Examining structures through which student voice is

heard is a natural starting point, but these neglect more ephemeral and performative

aspects of the student voice which operate outside these structures.

History has been described as an attempt to recreate significant features of the past on

the basis of fragmentary and imperfect evidence. (Barraclough in Marwick 1970).

Similarly whatever our motivations for seeking a student voice the voice heard is by its

very nature partial, fragmented and imperfect. Just as the historian can only understand

the past through what can be retrieved, the student voice can only be retrieved in part.

At its broadest scope student voice includes any utterance or thought or perspective

which comes from a student. Thoughts which stay inside a student's mind, ephemeral

conversations which take place between students are not a student voice in the

university unless they are translated into a form which can be understood.

Understanding student voice this widely may seem farcical but it reminds us that

anything which is presented as a student voice is partial, fragmentary and imperfect. An

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absence of audible voice is not the same as an absence of engagement as is assumed

under the current regime where, 'Silent listening and thinking are assumed to be

markers of passivity and therefore not indicative of engagement.' (Gourlay 2015, 404).

Some voices are totally unheard; others are not heard in the places where they may

inform universities practices. Others are misunderstood or misinterpreted. And just

because a sound is being made does not mean it is of value to the hearer whether the

hearer seeks the student voice for viewpoint, marketing, enhancing the quality of

teaching and learning or listening to the student voice because it is the right thing to do

according to procedures. In a context of children's participation in society, Crowley

(2012) explores the notion of 'consumer citizen' and the discourse of partnership, but

fundamentally she asks in the title of her thesis, 'Is anybody listening?'

I overhear student voices in the campus library, in cafés, in the sports hall changing

rooms (a highly gendered student voice) and on public transport. These voices are

conversations between students about their courses, their experiences, even individual

lecturers, which are unlikely to be captured in other contexts. Is it my right (ethical) to

listen in to (sometimes loud) conservations not directed at me? Can I share information

from these conversations with my colleagues? On the other hand these conversations

may not be useful at all.

The most helpful student voice is not necessarily the formalised 'student voice' but the

informal discussion, the one-on-one conversation in the corridor, a 'eureka moment'

when addressing a particular issue in class. The formal student voice articulated through

the NSS, internal surveys, module evaluation forms and staff-student committees may

or may not to be helpful to those who work with students in any capacity. Procedures

for collecting and listening to student voices can be valuable in ensuring that students

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have the place, time and opportunity to express their views but this does not guarantee

that the voice will be any more or less valuable than a serendipitous or ephemeral voice.

In data collection terms response bias and the stakes students have in university

reputation and relationships are far too important. Internal surveys and qualitative data

can resolve some of these difficulties, but does the seeking of patterns in qualitative data

(see Grebennikov and Shah 2013) lead to a situation where minority perspectives are

ignored as the 'big picture' becomes essential?

Discussions of universities as businesses or the student as consumer are further

problematic as they relate the student voice the voice of a consumer who has purchased

a product which they are happy or unhappy with. A consumer who is disappointed with

a washing machine can resort to all kinds of attempts to get his/her money back. A

choice of university course is a largely irreversible commitment. Students can and do

change courses, transfer or undertake a second course but the financial and time costs

are very high. If the course experience is negative, inadequate or does not prepare the

students in the way they were led to believe they still have reconcile themselves to their

experience. It will still be three or more years on the CV, and the belief that tens of

thousands of pounds and three or four years of life has been wasted is a surely a more

fundamental problem than the life impacts of a badly performing home appliance.

A student voice is not necessarily spoken towards the university. A complaint becomes

'public' when it goes outside the boundary of the firm (or organisation), and the key

place for this dissatisfaction to be expressed is online (Grégoire et al 2009). A glance at

The Student Room website gives insight into a usually anonymous student voice, in

which dissatisfaction is sometimes expressed. It is not always clear whether these

students have attempted to get redress from the university and failed, or whether the

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public forum is the only place in which they have expressed their voice. At the time of

writing a free to edit wiki profiling one university outlines poor teaching, poor careers

advice and poor facilities. Grégoire et al (2009) explore the notion of revenge on a

company, but revenge on a university seems problematic for the reasons outlined above.

As an interesting aside The Student Room is now working in partnership with the

HEA.[5]

4. Non-representing the student voice.

        A fourth framework for considering student voice is offered by Non-

Representational Theory (NRT), developed in Human Geography predominantly

through the work of Nigel Thrift (e.g. 1994, 2007) and developed by various others (see

Anderson and Harrison 2010 eds.). NRT is essentially concerned with practice and 'the

geography of what happens' (Thrift 2008, 2) going beyond the dualism of 'the world

and its meanings' (Anderson and Harrison 2010, 6). 'Nonrepresentational thinking tends

toward an academic style which seeks to describe and present rather than diagnose and

represent' (Cadman 2009, 461) Cadman (2009, 456-457) traces its philosophical

genealogy from three main positions; firstly, phenomenology (particularly Wittgenstein,

Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) whose influence on Bourdieu will be most well-known to

those in education. A second set of influences comes through the neovitalist work of

Spinoza, Neitzsche, Bergson, Delueze and Guattari. A third set of influences come from

post-structural theory, notably Derrida, Lyotard and Baudrillard. Therefore emphasis on

practice as opposed to representation is not philosophically or methodologically unique

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5   https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/about/news/11128

to NRT, yet NRT offers a potentially accessible framework in for addressing

educational phenomena.

> While we do not always notice it we are always involved in and caught up with
> whole arrays of activities and practices. Our conscious reflections, thoughts, and
> intentions move on from this background 'hum' of ongoing activity (Anderson and
> Harrison 2010, 7).

Anderson and Harrison (2010, 7) give examples of how much of everyday life is

unreflective. '…did you think about opening the door or did you just open it? When

you sat down did you have to remember what a seat was or how to use one?'

So how might NRT apply to the notion of student voice? First we can examine

practices. We can observe these practices as the events, the spatial performances which

take place. A student receives an email on his phone inviting him to complete the NSS.

He clicks on the link enters his details and selects his answer. Is he thinking as a he fills

in the form? Perhaps he gives it a lot of thought. Maybe he is in a night club with his

friends—maybe he is totally concentrated on this task. Maybe he has the phone in one

hand and a games controller in the other hand. Maybe he asks his friends what they

think. Another student is elected the student representative for her course. She

physically attends a termly committee meaning. Is she thinking about the meeting in the

context of the university quality processes, or is this a one-off enclosed event with no

reverberating consequences? Does she have a personal agenda for the course, or is this a

performance to get something good onto her CV? Who does she represent? Who (if

anyone) does she think she represents? She may communicate with the teaching staff

on her course, but do they understand what she is saying? When the teaching staff say

they will take action what does that mean,—indeed does it mean anything at all?

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> If "speaking about" is also involved here, however, the entire edifice of the "crisis
> of representation" must be connected as well. In both the practice of speaking for
> as well as the practice of speaking about others, I am engaging in the act of
> representing the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, who they are… This act
> of representation cannot be understood as founded on an act of discovery wherein I
> discover their true selves and then simply relate my discovery. (Alcoff 1991, 9).

As with Gourlay's (2015, 409) approach to student engagement, the emphasis of NRT is
on 'what students do as opposed to what they ought to do'. The empirical study of
habits, the unconscious, the everyday, will alter 'our expectation about the kinds of
empirical data we can generate' (Dewsbury 2014, 15). By approaching the study of
student voice through a lens of 'what happens', rather than seeking to represent student
voice, we have the potential to develop a less egocentric perspective of the world
(Dewsbury 2014, 15). Rather than collecting representations of student voice for the
purposes of 'improving things', or being seen to be listening we can potentially gain
different perspectives which 'sharpen an openness to the world.'(Dewsbury 2014, 15).

Critics within Human Geography have charged that NRT is lacking a political project.
Castree and MacMillan (2004) contend that we should not give up on the politics of
representation:

> More fundamentally we maintain that representation will not go away so long as so
> many actors and institutions continue to act as though (implicitly or explicitly) they
> are others are routinely engaged in representational acts. (Castree and MacMillan
> 2004, 375)

While the details of these debates are somewhat beyond the scope of this paper, an
inability to know (not unlike lens 3) does not mean an inability to act. However, by
looking 'actions of tendency', rather than 'willed actions', (Dewsbury 2014: 15) we can
potentially develop a richer understanding of student voice.

Final thoughts

This paper demonstrates ways we can use different theoretical lenses to bear on our studies of student voice recognising that student voice can be viewed through a number of theoretical lens which have been previously employed for different purposes. Posecznick (2014, 3) notes that relatively few academics have drawn upon the intellectual resources of their disciplines to address issues of surrounding the neoliberal university. This paper has outlined some potential discipline-based intellectual resources we can draw upon, in thinking about student voice. Although I have presented these as four lenses/ frameworks this is not a case of either/ or, but drawing on a variety of approaches.

Firstly these frameworks offer more potential for examining the cartographies of power behind the collection of and representation of student voice. These power structures exist both outside the university (in Government, national students' unions) and within universities themselves (university leaders, teaching staff, student representatives).

 Secondly, voice needs to be understood more broadly than the expression of the spoken or written word. The unspoken voice, silence and the unconscious student voice need greater consideration and practice-orientated approaches such as NRT may offer potential. Moreover, emphasis on organisations and structures can lead to neglect of voice, perceived to be marginal.

Thirdly, these frameworks offer opportunities to go further than representation of the student voice, either though problematising representation or by going beyond representation altogether as in the case of NRT. They can each be used to inform new approaches to empirical research into student voice.

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