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How can we confidently judge the extent to which student voice in higher education has been genuinely amplified? A proposal for a new evaluation framework

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How can we confidently judge the extent to which student voice in higher education has been genuinely amplified? A proposal for a new evaluation framework

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Abstract

This article aims to contribute to the development of frameworks for evaluating student voice projects in higher education by offering a critically evaluative account of two student voice projects. Although both projects had been underpinned by the principles of participatory (inclusive) research, one appeared to be more successful than the other in engaging students in a productive or meaningful way. In order to confirm and explain these perceived differences, this paper draws on both student voice and participatory research literature to identify two potentially useful evaluation criteria: reach and fitness for purpose. These criteria are applied to three project factors: aims and assumptions; processes; and outcomes to produce an amplitude framework for evaluating student voice in higher education. It is argued that this framework has the potential to enable a rich account of the relative successes and failures of student voice initiatives in higher education.

Keywords: student voice, higher education, evaluation frameworks, participatory research

Introduction

Student voice initiatives in higher education have taken on a number of different forms (see for example NUS Student Engagement Toolkit; Carey, 2013; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014). These range from involving students in curriculum (re)design; obtaining students evaluations of their learning experiences and establishing student representation on decision-making bodies. For each kind of student voice activity, the role of the student is conceptualised differently. For example, when students are involved in curriculum design they are frequently conceptualised as peers or consultants in the pedagogical planning process (Cook-Sather, 2008a, 2008b, 2010, 2011). The movement to increase the involvement of students in the evaluation of learning and teaching processes at an institutional level has lead to the conceptualisation of students as partners, producers or change-agents. These conceptualisations, certainly in the UK, currently dominate higher education discourses. As partners, students are conceptualised as co-creators of institutional strategy (Healey, et al. 2010); As change-agents, students are conceptualised as being actively engaged in the processes of change, often taking on a leadership role (Kay, Dunne, Hutchison, 2010). As producers, students are conceptualised as researchers or inquirers who, in partnership with university staff co-produce knowledge (Taylor & Wilding, 2009; Nearey, 2010). Across these different initiatives there are differences in the intentions or goals (e.g. changing individual practice versus changing institutional practice) but the overarching aim is the same- to bring about a change in how students and staff within a higher education

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institution relate to one another. The purpose of this article is to examine the extent to which it is possible to evaluate student voice initiatives such as the ones I have outlined in a meaningful and rigorous way. Given that student voice projects are very varied, I am not conceiving of evaluation in terms of normatively judging worth or efficiency against some standard or bench-mark. Rather, I am conceiving of evaluation in terms of judging intended impact and relevance. I am interested in evaluating the extent to which student voice initiatives in higher education meet their intended aims and objectives; the needs of both students and academics and therefore the extent to which genuine transformation of institutional structures and/or individual practices are brought about. It is my argument that not enough attention has been paid to how student voice initiatives have and can be evaluated.

There has been an increasing commitment by higher education policy makers and funders to ensuring that higher education practice is informed by the student voice. For example, in the UK, The Department for Innovations, Universities and Skills launched its' student listening programme in 2007 designed to 'amplify the student voice' [1]. In the tide of student engagement initiatives that followed, it has not always been entirely clear how the government, institutions or practitioners have been evaluating the extent to which student voice has actually been amplified. Unsurprisingly therefore, student voice work in higher education has been accused of lacking explicit evaluation frameworks. For example, Bovill, Morss and Bulley (2009, 21) have argued that "unfortunately there is little systematic evaluation of the impact of student participation". Writing in the context of student participation in curriculum design, Bovill, Morss and Bulley (2007, 25) conclude their review of student voice work by stating that: "The principles advocated in the literature are intuitively appealing, but were frequently promoted with a lack of evidence for success in practice".

One reason why systematic evaluation of student voice work may be currently missing in the field relates to a shift in focus, particularly in the UK, from individual student voice initiatives towards more centralised institutional initiatives. Five years ago or more, many student voice projects were initiated by individual practitioners keen to involve students in the redesign of programmes and committed to reflecting on their practice (see for example Campbell et al. 2007). Evaluation of student voice work was therefore implicitly embedded in a reflective practice framework, but not widely shared. A major consequence of the move from an individual focus to an institutional focus on student voice or engagement as exemplified by Student as Change-Agent projects was that evaluation moved from being reflective, to becoming more like an audit. Institutions are now encouraged to monitor the presence or absence of opportunities for students to be involved in evaluation, decision-making or curriculum design. They therefore tend to map activity, rather than evaluate the success of that activity. Where there are attempts to judge the quality or success of student voice activities; rather simplistic measures such as frequency tend to be used. For example, Cardiff University developed a student voice framework based on the NUS Student Engagement Toolkit [2]. The framework provides an overall matrix across a number of activities and areas, including student engagement with curriculum design; gathering, evaluating and responding to school-level, university and national feedback; student academic representation; student-staff panels and student union elected officers. Cardiff University has used the framework to map current practice across all activity areas and act as a structure to allocate priorities to activities that require further development. So, for example, in relation to judging participation of students in

curriculum design, schools within the university are asked to evaluate themselves against a 'threshold statement' :

> "Schools regularly run student focus groups to gain student feedback on learning activities. Student -Staff Panels are routinely used to inform developments in the curriculum" [3]

Another reason why systematic evaluation of student voice work may be currently missing in the field is that there tends to be unquestioned assumptions about the outcomes of student voice work. For example, Harvey (2001) and Shah and Nair (2006) have challenged what they see as unquestioned assumptions in higher education that student feedback will actually lead to actions or improvement. Linked to this, there can be a tendency for student voice to be viewed as unquestionably positive or unproblematic. For example, concepts such as participation and partnership are frequently associated with student voice, but they are ideologically laden and therefore tend to be viewed as unquestionably positive (Bovill, Morss & Bulley 2009). This means that possible drawbacks are not always considered, which may in turn limit the scope and depth of any evaluation. For example, there is evidence to suggest that the partnership between student and tutors should be examined carefully in order to evaluate the power relationship between them (Carey 2013; Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten 2011; Bain 2010).

This article aims to contribute to the development of frameworks for evaluating student voice projects in higher education by offering a critically evaluative account of two institutionally funded student voice projects in higher education: Participatory Approaches to Inclusion Related Staff Development (PAIRS) and Participatory Partnerships in Education (PIE). The design of both projects was underpinned by the principles of participatory research which emphasises collaborative, non-hierarchical relationships between researchers (in this case tutors) and participants (in this case students) where both have equal power and status. One way in which this is enacted is that participants are encouraged to own the outcome of the research by setting the goals and sharing in decisions about processes (See Seale 2010).

My initial reflections on the apparent success of the two student voice projects had led me to conclude that the PAIRS project had been more successful at ensuring participation than the PIE project. This conclusion was influenced largely by recruitment issues. The programme that was the focus on attention in the PIE project was underpinned by critical pedagogy, leading the tutors to believe that the collegiate relationships they had with their students would result in close to 100% response rate (See Seale et al. in press). However, from a cohort of 65 second year students, just 11 participated and it took us several months to reach this level of participation. A closer examination of the recruitment statistics however (See Table 1), suggest that my personal conclusion is incorrect. The response rate for PIE (20%) is actually higher than that for PAIRS (6.6%). This disconnect between my post-hoc personal reflections and recruitment data, led me to ask the question: Can I make legitimate claims regarding the success or failure of either of these projects in the absence of an explicit evaluation framework? This question led to a process of critical evaluation where, in addition to my own personal reflections I consulted four sources of evidence: descriptions of the process and outcomes of the PAIRS project published by Seale (2010); post-hoc reflections of some of the PIE team

members which included one student co-researcher and two programme tutors published by Seale et al. (in press); student voice literature and participatory research literature.

In this paper I will share how I conducted this critical evaluation. I will begin by describing how a comparison of the contexts of the two projects led me to identify 'reach' and 'fitness' as potential evaluation criteria. I will then show how I applied these two criteria to an evaluation of three components of the two projects: aims and assumptions; processes and outcomes. I will conclude by discussing the potential validity and usefulness of the resulting 'Amplitude Framework' for evaluating student voice initiatives in higher education.

Identifying reach and fitness for purpose as potential evaluation criteria

In reflecting on my experience of undertaking the two projects, one of the first things I did was to examine the context of each project. This led me to identify two potential evaluation criteria: reach and fitness for purpose. In this section I will provide an overview of the significant contextual issues that I identified and then show, through a comparison of the contexts of the PAIRS and PIE project how the criteria of 'reach' and 'fitness for purpose' emerged.

The first student voice project, PAIRS, was undertaken in the 2007/2008 academic year (Seale, 2010); whilst the second project, PIE, was undertaken in the 2011/2012 academic year in a different institution (Seale et al. in press). Formal ethical approval for both projects was obtained through the School of Education Ethics Committee of each university. Key ethical issues that were addressed in the projects included processes for gaining access to the students, ensuring informed consent; clarifying and respecting student's wishes regarding anonymity and assuring confidentially of information collected. See Seale (2008) for more details. An overview of the two student voice projects is presented in Table 1.

< Table 1 about here>

The PAIRS project was a Teaching Fellowship project funded by the central learning and teaching development unit of the host institution. The project was conducted within a context of an increasing recognition of the importance of developing inclusive learning and teaching at the University and the need to involve students in the design and delivery of staff development materials and activities. The aims of the PAIRS project therefore, were twofold. Firstly to capture "student voices" regarding their learning experiences within one School at the University and use these "voices" to explore whether and how educational programmes include or exclude students with a wide range of learning needs from experiencing positive or high quality learning opportunities. Secondly, to involve students in the analysis and exploration of these "student voices" and develop a collaborative partnership whereby students help to develop materials and methods that can be used to help staff in the work towards meeting learning needs and reducing barriers to inclusion. In phase one students were given the opportunity to choose one of five methods to tell their stories which ranged from writing a reflective journal that described a "critical incident" that was really positive or negative in terms of their learning experience to producing a piece of creative writing or art (e.g. poem, picture,

sculpture, song) that expressed their feelings and experiences in relation to the quality of their learning experience. In phase two, students were given the opportunity to volunteer to work with me to analyse the experiences elicited from students in phase one and use this analysis to identify issues that might inform staff development initiatives and potential ways of disseminating key messages from the project to staff.

The PIE project was also a Teaching Fellowship project funded by the central learning and teaching development unit of the host institution. The original intention was to try and replicate the methods of the PAIRS project, in order to demonstrate generalisability of the underpinning participatory methodological framework. The overarching aim of the project therefore was to enable students to have influence over the way their voice was heard, with the intention of enabling tutors to respond with improved insight, to the issues raised by students. Related project objectives were twofold. Firstly, to capture "voices" of second year students in one particular programme, regarding their learning experiences on the first year of the programme. Secondly, to involve students in the analysis and exploration of these "student voices" by developing a collaborative partnership whereby students help to develop materials and methods that can be used to inform future teaching on the programme. In phase one; a steering committee was formed comprising programme team members and second year students from the programme. The role of the steering committee was to discuss and agree the different methods that would be offered to project participants to enable them to voice their learning experiences. Phase two focused on recruiting participants from the second year undergraduate programme who were willing to share their experiences of their first year of study. Phase three involved recruiting student 'co-researchers' from the second year cohort to work with the project team to analyse and interpret the themes and messages that could be drawn from the voices, paying particular attention to what programme teachers can learn about factors that contribute positively or negatively to the first year student experience. It was also planned to convene two to three focus groups of first year students to present analyses from the second year cohort and explore similarities and differences in the student experience. The final phase involved working with the steering committee to use the results from the project to inform the development and dissemination of staff development materials.

In reflecting on the context of the two projects it is clear that there were both differences and similarities in terms of intended **'reach'**. For the PAIRS project the focus was at a departmental level (a range of programmes within an education department). For the PIE project the primary focus was at a programme level (one programme within an education department). The fact that both projects were institutional projects, funded by central learning and teaching development units, also meant that that each had a secondary target in terms of intended reach. There was a clear expectation from the centre, that each project would disseminate its findings and experiences across the wider institution. Evaluating and comparing the success of the two projects could therefore focus on the extent to which the processes of each project reached or encompassed the intended primary and secondary targets and the extent to which the outcomes or results of the project influenced and informed the intended primary and secondary targets.

Both the PAIRS and PIE project were similar in that they were both positioned as staff development projects in the sense that I intended to use the voices of students to inform the development and delivery of staff development resources and activities. The extent to which

the two projects were able to reach their intended targets could therefore depend on their **'fitness for purpose'** and how successfully the staff development resources and activities were cascaded or disseminated to the intended targets.

Although my reflections on the contexts of the two projects had suggested the potential relevance of 'reach' and 'fitness for purpose' as evaluation criteria, I still needed some more concrete factors to apply these criteria to. In the following three sections I discuss how I came to identify three potential factors: aims and assumptions; processes and outcomes. By applying 'reach' and 'fitness for purpose' to these factors I was able to expand how I defined and understood both terms (See Table 5).

Identifying aims and assumptions as a potential focus for evaluation

Many student voice initiatives are built on two assumptions regarding what motivates students to participate. The first assumption is that students will want to have a say over their education. The second assumption is that students will want to have say in order to correct the imperfect and change things for the better. One classic example of these two premises is the proliferation of ' students as change-agents' projects in the UK higher education sector (See for example, Kay, Dunne and Hutchinson 2010) We expect students to voice dissatisfaction and to steer universities in how to make improvements. As the Welsh Assembly (2009, 15) put it, we expect them to be a 'force for influence and change'. Certainly in the PAIRS and PIE projects some students aired dissatisfaction. For the PAIRS project I noted that some students appeared to have been motivated to take part because they had "bees in their bonnet" about particular issues such as a placement not enabling learning outcomes to be met or some students appearing to get away with missing deadlines (Seale 2008). In the PIE project, some students aired dissatisfaction with lack of choice for module options, number of contact hours for fees paid or size of groups. (Seale et al. in press). Results from the PAIRS and PIE project also revealed that students did on occasions want to talk about positive things. For example, in both projects several students highlighted how much they had valued support from helpful tutors. One of the PIE student co-researchers gave a fascinating insight into why students may express satisfaction in preference to expressing dissatisfaction. She suggested that students may in fact be resisting the role of disgruntled consumer that we seem to want to force upon them (Seale et al. in press).The student expressed her resistance in terms of wanting to ' step away from the consumerism which appears to be the driving force in current HE provision'. McLeod (2011, 186) argued: "Students, at least in my experience, are usually less won over by the rhetoric of inclusion and the romance of voice". Perhaps the PIE co-researcher was also not fooled by the marketisation of higher education, disguised as student voice (Naidoo and Jamieson 2007; Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion 2009). There would seem value therefore in evaluating the **'reach'** of project aims and assumptions in terms of evaluating the extent to which all participants 'bought into' the aims, identified problems and assumptions of the project.

In addition to generic assumptions, there were also some project specific assumptions. For the PAIRS project it was assumed that students would be interested in participating because they are rarely involved in the design and delivery of staff development and CPD materials. For the PIE project it was assumed that students would be interested in participating because they would relish the opportunity to evaluate their learning experiences in a different way. For both

projects this assumption appeared to be faulty. In both projects, many students appeared to be motivated to participate because they wanted to learn more about the methods of the project: they were treating participation as a learning experience, as much, if not more than they were treating it as an opportunity to give feedback or get involved in the design and development of staff development materials:

> I was genuinely impressed with the project methodology that you used for this research. Would it be at all possible for me to reference your work officially within my own EdD work? I would sincerely appreciate being able to reflect on your methodology within my thesis as many aspects of it fit brilliantly with the ideas that I have so far myself [...] I particularly enjoyed being a part of your project and this taught me many things about carrying out my own research upon/with others. (PAIRS participant)

> I wanted to take part in the project as I saw it as a valuable learning opportunity. I have previously had little experience in data collection and analysis. I hoped that working towards the write up of the project alongside experienced academic writers would improve my own writing. I saw this project as a useful insight into what it would be like to conduct a research project of my own, a requirement in the third year of my course. So again, although the project would not directly affect my results, I could use newly acquired skills to inform my university work with hopefully a positive effect on my final grade. (PIE participant)

There may be a case therefore for revisiting what empowerment and engagement means in student voice work, with respect to being equally receptive to stories of satisfaction as well as dissatisfaction and being sensitive to the range of factors that might motivate students to participate. In reflecting on these issues it may also be useful to draw comparisons from the participatory research literature. For example, Dyson (2007) examined and highlighted the tensions that exist when academic researchers make presumptions about people with learning disabilities and see them as oppressed, with a political agenda that they want to articulate. Considerations such as these may be useful when trying to interpret what a perceived 'lack of voice' or silence means. For example, in the PIE project, the silence of ninety or so students perturbed me and my colleagues. But perhaps it is a cause for celebration. Given that the programme being evaluated by students was underpinned by critical pedagogy and therefore heavily influenced by notions of voice and empowerment perhaps so few students took part in the PIE project because the programme in question had done such a good job of liberating voice in other ways. The resistance observed therefore may simply be a resistance to what is perceived as a redundant initiative initiated from outside the programme. There would seem value therefore in evaluating the **'fitness'** of project aims and assumptions in terms of evaluating the extent to which the assumptions on which the student voice project is based are accurate.

Identifying process as a potential focus for evaluation

In the student voice and participatory research literature both process and outcomes are integral to perceptions of success. The distinction between process and outcomes in student voice work is highlighted by McLeod (2011) who distinguishes between two notions of voice:

voice as participation (in learning, or in democratic processes) where students express their views and participate in major decisions about their learning and voice as strategy (to achieve empowerment, transformation or equality. The participatory research literature talks of change both as an outcome and a process of participatory research. For example, Duckett and Pratt (2001, 831) talk about seeking "positive change through the very process of doing the research" and urges us to attend not just to the outputs of a research process, but to the through-puts. In this section I will examine how processes are conceptualised within the student voice and participatory research literature and reflect on the extent to which the processes of the PAIRS and PIE project might be meaningfully evaluated using the criteria of 'reach' and 'fitness for purpose'.

In the student voice literature, processes are emphasised through a focus on the related concepts of feedback, collaboration, participation, dialogue and partnership whilst outcomes are frequently expressed in terms of transformation. There is a strong inter-relationship between the five process-focused concepts. Feedback is at the heart of student voice with proponent arguing that students have a fundamental right to voice their opinions (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield 2007; Cook-Sather 2008). Cook-Sather (2011) and Moore et al. (2009) position students as consultants who collaborate with tutors to redesign courses. A key aspect of this collaboration involves students acting as active constructive participants in faculty development (Cook-Sather 2011). Bain (2010) talks of a dialogic approach where teachers and students work and learn together in partnership. For the UK Quality Assurance Agency, partnership between students and staff is based on: 'the values of: openness; trust and honesty; agreed shared goals and values; and regular communication between the partners' (QAA 2012, 3).

Like student voice literature, participatory research literature emphasises **collaborative** partnerships, but goes beyond this to emphasise non-hierarchical relationships where researcher and participant have equal status and power (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995). Where student voice literature talks of dialogue, participatory research literature emphasises **ownership:** Participants are encouraged to own the outcome of the research by setting the goals and sharing in decisions about processes (Everitt et al. 1992). Participatory research attempts to engage participants in the whole research process from design through to evaluation. There is a particular emphasis on participants identifying the research problems and questions to ensure that they consider the research "worthy of investigation" (Chappell 2000).

Evaluating the reach and fitness of processes

It is my contention that in the majority of student voice projects processes are evaluated rather vaguely. Evaluation questions focus very broadly on satisfaction with or reaction to being involved in the project (See for example, Campbell et al. 2007). Comparatively speaking, the evaluation of processes in participatory research is more focused and more explicitly articulated. As a result factors such as collaboration can be judged through questions such as: To what extent were the relationships between students and staff collaborative and non-hierarchical? Ownership can be judged through questions such as: To what extent were students informed and have opportunities to choose whether and how they participated? To what extent did students own the goals and share in the decision-making processes? To what

extent were students engaged in the whole process from design through to dissemination? (See for example, Seale, Draffan and Wald 2008). Using questions like these to evaluate the **reach** of the processes of the two projects revealed both similarities and differences (See Tables 2 and 3).

< Table 2 and 3 about here>

Tables 2 and 3 on their own tell us little as the institutional audit mapping exercises discussed earlier. In order to understand the differences between the two projects that these two tables reveal, it is necessary to delve in more depth into the processes of both projects. As part of the ethical procedures of both the PAIRS and PIE projects, students were given an information sheet about the project, which detailed project aims and stages, the different roles they could choose in each stage and the different methods they could choose to contribute their voice. In the PAIRS project students could choose to contribute their learning experiences in phase one and/or to be a member of an advisory group in phase two, with responsibility for analysing the experiences obtained in phase one. In the PIE project, students could choose to take on a range of roles from contributor (sharing learning experiences), to steering committee member, co-researcher (analysing experiences) and writer (co-presenting results at a conference). In the PAIRS project students were given a choice of five methods by which they could share their learning experiences. In the PIE project, the steering committee members were given the choice of replicating the five methods used in the PAIRS project. They declined and designed their own method (see next section). In both projects, students in the advisory group/steering committee were informed of the results.

The real difference between the projects is revealed in Table 3, and focuses on the design of voice capture tools. At the beginning of the PIE project, the steering committee met to discuss what methods should be used to try and capture student voices. As a starting point I shared with the committee the methods I had used in the PAIRS project where students were given the opportunity to choose one of five methods to tell their stories which ranged from writing a reflective journal that described a "critical incident" that was really positive or negative in terms of their learning experience to producing a piece of creative writing or art (e.g. poem, picture, sculpture, song) that expressed their feelings and experiences in relation to the quality of their learning experience. Although these methods could be considered more creative than the usual focus groups or surveys that tend to be used in student voice projects in higher education the student members of the committee felt that their peers would be overwhelmed by the amount of choices offered. Therefore, after a series of meetings, they proposed and developed their own singular method, which they called a 'Mood Board' (The idea is that students are given a blank sheet of A4 and invited to record their thoughts and impressions of the course in written or pictorial form).

The fact that PIE students were involved in the design of voice capture tools and the PAIRS students were not, would suggest that the PIE project was more successful than the PAIRS project in terms of reach. So why then therefore, had I initially felt that PIE was not successful as PAIRS? A comment made by one PIE participant (See Seale et al. in press) may provide some insight:

In my role as a student co-researcher I chose to take part in three of the four options provided for student participation. I completed a mood board as part of the data collection, I was involved in the data analysis and now I am taking part in the write-up of the project. The fact that the participation options had been split into four defined categories is an example of how it seemed, at least at the beginning that the project belonged to the staff members and not the students; having pre-defined methods of participation, designed by staff, limited student's freedom in their involvement. The project was commissioned and instigated by university staff; perhaps students on the programme might have felt more inclined to participate if the project had originated from students, if we had expressed an interest or need to have our voices recorded.

What is being alluded to here is the fact that students had not had an opportunity to define and determine the boundaries of how they value choice. This reflects very much a key argument made by Radermacher (2006) who, writing in the context of participatory research with disabled people, warned of the danger of non-disabled people making assumptions about the best way to participate. Here in the context of the PIE project perhaps I had made a dangerous or faulty assumption about the best way to offer choice; an assumption that positioned students in a way that was potentially at odds with how the underpinning pedagogy of their programme positioned them. Further evaluative work would be needed however, in order to ascertain if other students in the PIE project felt the same as the student reported here. In such work it may be helpful to examine in more detail what motivates students to take part in student voice work and how aware students are of the potential differences between how their programmes and how student voice project position them in relation to issues of choice, power and control. Addressing these issues enables an interrogation of assumptions that is an essential aspect of the evaluation framework that I propose (See Table 5).

In addition to evaluating how successful the processes of the projects were in terms of capturing student voice, it would seem pertinent to evaluate how successful the project processes were in terms of responding to the student voice. In other words, were the processes **'fit'** for the intended purpose of bringing about change through staff development? Evaluating the extent to which processes were put in place to enable the intended reach revealed significant differences between the two projects in terms of both dissemination and engagement activities (See Table 4). Dissemination and staff development were intended outcomes at the start of both projects. However, by the end of the PIE project very few internal dissemination or engagement activities had actually taken place. Where the PAIRS project was putting energy into activities such as setting up an internal wiki and running staff development workshops, the PIE project had put its energy in speaking to an external audience through conference and journal papers. Project members were engaging from distance, at an intellectual level, as opposed to engaging at 'the front line', at a practice level.

< Table 4 about here>

While it may be helpful to map how differently 'fit for purpose' the processes in the two projects were, there is a limit to this helpfulness unless we can understand why there was a difference. A key to understanding this may relate to the nature of the student feedback in the two projects. In the PAIRS project, the focus of student feedback was completely on factors that

were in the power of tutors to change, such as improving communication, increasing help with essay writing. For the PIE project, some of the focus of the student feedback was on factors that were not in tutor's direct control: namely tuition fees (see next section for more detail). With regards to evaluating the fitness of student voice processes, this raises the issue of the extent to which university personnel have the power to act on student voices. In the UK, fees have been imposed on university tutors. The government has decided that fees will be charged and individual universities have decided, with little or no consultation with tutors, what level of fees to charge. Tutors therefore have no power to change fees (although they can control to some extent what students 'receive' for these fees). Prior to the centralization and institutionalisation of student voice activities, dialogue was perceived as being between student and tutor. Now, potentially, dialogue is (or needs to be) between student, tutor and institution. However, this only works if tutors feel that they too have a voice and will be listened to. In the PIE project for example, the reactions of one tutor suggests that she did not feel empowered to act on student feedback. She spoke of feeling over-worked and under-represented and used this to justify a kind of exhausted resistance to responding to the consumerised voices of students (See Seale et al. in press).

Cook-Sather and Alter (2011) use the concept of liminality to argue that students who engage in student voice projects take up a liminal state between student and teacher with the goal of accessing and acting on the insights that such a state affords. They argue that for students, there is power in being in this liminal state, separated from the collective. But what about teachers? In student voice projects are they occupying a liminal state between tutor and student and what, if any, power does this state afford them if they are separated from the collective? In mediating between student and institution, do they really have the power to advocate for change? This is an issue that is largely ignored in student voice literature. Whilst some writers recommend that student voice projects need to be supported by ensuring that staff are empowered to act (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten 2011, 142) much of the advice in this field, regarding power and agency, largely addresses what teachers might need to do or reflect on in order to feel comfortable relinquishing control to students.

Some insight into factors that might influence or limit the agency of teachers to transform their practice in response to student voice is offered by Healey, Flint and Harrington, (2014) who suggest that it may be useful to reflect on the situated nature of power. The example they give is of a 'sabbatical officer' from a students' union who may sit on more high level committees that a 'senior lecturer' and therefore have access to different forms of influence. Solutions to the tensions regarding how much power students have in relation to teachers tend to focus on the development of open negotiations regarding how potential staff-student partnerships will work (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014). This may require teachers being honest with themselves and their students regarding not only the extent to which they are willing to change things, but also the extent to which they are able (have the power) to change things. This links to the call by Taylor and Robinson (2014) for university staff who are engaged in student voice projects to 'act well' with regards to making professional and 'wise' judgements about the relationships they develop with students. Acting well may involve considering ethical issues such as the openness with which students are given information about the potential for change in order to make informed decisions about whether they wish to participate.

Identifying outcome as a potential focus for evaluation

In this section I will examine how outcomes are conceptualised within the student voice and participatory research literature and reflect on the extent to which the outcomes of the PAIRS and PIE project might be meaningfully evaluated using the criteria of 'reach' and 'fitness for purpose'.

In student voice work there is an expectation that either the tutor or the student will be changed in some way. For the teacher, this **transformation** may be in terms of a transformation of understanding, or what Cook-Sather and Alter (2011, 37) called: "transforming deep-seated societal understandings of education based on traditional hierarchies and teacher-student distinctions". For the student this transformation is typically conceptualised as empowerment. For example, Bain (2010) talks of the transformative possibilities of student voice in relation to leading to empowered autonomous learners. Cook-Sather (2010) talks about transformation in the context of: students learning to be better learners; recognising differences between learners and feeling 'inspired and empowered'. **Transformation** is conceptualised rather differently in the participatory research literature. Participation is argued to bring about changes in the power relationships (French and Swain 2004; Gilbert 2004); changes in attitude; changes in funding priorities (Duckett and Pratt 2001) or changes in practice. The emphasis within participatory research on owning the research, sharing power, as well as having control and choice means that participatory research is strongly linked to empowerment. For many, empowerment happens through engagement in the process of participatory research, for others empowerment is a result of the outcome of the research- in terms of aiding or empowering others (Kitchin 2000).

Evaluating the reach and fitness of outcomes

The success of the outcomes of participatory research is often discussed in relation to how much participation was facilitated. Terms such as 'shallow' or 'deep' and 'narrow' or 'wide' have been applied to participatory research when debating how much control or ownership participants have, or how many or few people are involved (Cornwall and Jukes 1995). However, a review of participatory research literature reveals that few, if any; participatory research projects offer formal, measurable indicators for 'successful' participation. Those that do can adopt rather meaningless indicators. For example**,** Palaigeorgiou, Triantafyllakos, and Tsinakos (2011) evaluated a participatory design project involving students co-designing a web learning environment. The design process involved a needs elicitation technique and Palaigeorgiou Triantafyllakos, and Tsinakos (2011, 146) claimed that: 'overall 773 needs were elicited proving that students had refined views'. It is difficult to judge however whether 773 is a meaningful measurement of success. It is no surprise then that researchers such as Naylor et al. (2002) argue that evaluating the extent of participation is complex. Evaluating empowerment as an outcome is equally complex. For some, asking questions such as "To what extent were participants disempowered before the project and empowered afterwards" is meaningless. For example, Oliver (1997) argues that empowerment is not in the gift of researchers, it is something that participants do for themselves collectively.

Whilst the evaluation of outcomes has been complex or vague in participatory research, the opposite appears to be true in student voice projects. More concrete measurements are referred to in the evaluation of outcomes, such as what changes have been made to the course and what has been learnt (Cook-Sather, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011; Cook-Sather and Alter 2011; Delpish et al. 2009; Manor et al. 2009; Mihans, Long and Felten. 2008; Moore et al. 2009). It is easier to judge whether student involvement in a project has made a difference to a lecturer's practice (e.g. the course being designed) compared to judging 'how much empowerment' was achieved.

In student voice literature there is an expectation that both students and tutors will have learnt something, that their understanding will have been transformed in some way (Cook-Sather, 2010, 2011; Manor et al. 2009; Delphish et al. 2009). In terms of **'reach'**; therefore it would seem appropriate to evaluate the extent to which in the PAIRS and PIE projects, transformation occurred for both students and tutors. In a previous section I have presented some evidence to suggest that for some students in both the PAIRS and PIE project they had learnt something about research methods and analysis skills. For both projects there is also evidence that staff learnt something they did not know before through listening to the student voices. For the PIE project, there was potential for the staff to learn about ' the big things that matter' i.e. fees. In the PAIRS project, the transformation of understanding was in relation to learning that ' the little things matter' i.e. smiling. Staff responses to these issues were however very different in the two projects. In this section I will illustrate this difference.

Much of what the eleven PIE student participants shared about their learning experiences was unsurprising and probably would have been obtained by standard student feedback methods. The exceptions to this were the comments made by six of the eleven students regarding a perceived lack of lecture time. Four students linked this issue to tuition fees. The following quote exemplifies the tone and nature of these references:

> I don't feel like I get enough contact hours during the week for the amount of money I pay! 6 hours a week I think is difficult to be able to learn the amount of things we are expected to… I don't' feel I am getting enough out of the course especially when we finish at the end of March to go away and write out coursework. The money I pay does not reflect the quality of teaching/learning experience. It is the same this year as I am only in for 3-6 hours a week. I can't believe I pay the same amount of tuition fees as someone who studies medicine and is in every day. You could probably fast track this course to two years if we were in every day. (Student 5)

Whilst the two programme tutors noted this feedback, they also appeared to reject it in terms of considering it beyond the remit of the project. For example, one tutor said:

> Fees, contact hours and value for money surfaced as important issues for some students in the data collected. Some students used the opportunity to voice this concern beyond the scope of the course itself. (Seale et al. in press)

The tutors considered it unhelpful that the wider institutional and policy issue of fees had leaked into programme discourses. Fees had become a disallowed topic of enquiry. Therefore while the tutors understood the issue, there appeared to be no intention to transform their

practice, on the basis of this understanding. Examples like this challenge us to question the extent to which student voice initiatives do result in transformation.

The results from the student analysis of the PAIRS data fell into two broad categories: Factors that helped student learning and factors that hindered learning. Four major factors emerged as helping learning: supportive tutors; knowledgeable and expert tutors; flexibility; sharing and communicating with peers. Four major factors emerged as hindering learning: workload issues; lack of information; poor communication; issues around essay writing skills (See Seale 2008 for more details). When these results were formally fed-back to Programme Directors, several indicated that the identified issues were not a surprise to them as they had been highlighted through other more standard student feedback methods. However, less formal follow-up work involving small staff development workshops revealed a different response. When given the time to engage with the rich, detailed and complete stories contributed by participants and to discuss with colleagues and reflect, teachers began to indicate that the stories were quite powerful for them, because they revealed not only the factors that were important to students, but the impact that these factors had on their academic and personal lives. Seale (2010) referred to this as a transformation of the familiar. For example, when reading about the positive impact of supportive tutors, teachers commented on how they had learnt that the seemingly little things (such as smiling at a student in the corridor) can have a large impact. When reading about the negative impact of work load issues, staff commented on how they frequently ignored or took for granted the wider "life contexts" that student inhabited. The stories from the PAIRS project put the student "voices" into a very real context for staff. This was very powerful in terms of transforming their perceptions of how influential their practices can be on the lives of students. In this sense, the outcomes not only had significant 'reach', they could be argued to have a **'fitness for purpose'** in that they enabled tutors to better understand students: to see higher education from their point of view.

The extent to which either the PAIRS or the PIE project enabled students to see things from tutors point of view is harder to evaluate. The comments students made in both projects about wanting to learn about research methods suggests potential for them to understand better what tutors do in relation to their research, but this would need further investigation.

The amplitude framework for evaluating student voice in higher education

In reflecting on my experience of engaging in two student voice projects and trying to understand whether and how I could justify my perceptions that one was more successful than an another, I have applied two criteria: reach and fitness for purposes to three factors: aims and assumptions; processes and outcomes. In doing so I have been able to expand on my conception of reach and fitness. Reach is now defined as the extent to which: all participants 'bought' in to the aims, identified problems and assumptions of the student voice project; all participants in the project had opportunities to influence, make choices and have a voice and transformation occurs for both students and tutors. Fitness is now defined as the extent to which: the extent to which: the assumptions on which the student voice project is based are accurate or evidenced based; processes are put in place/planned into the student voice project

to enable meaningful responses to the student voice; university personnel have the power or are willing to act on student voices and students and staff understand one another better.

The application of reach and fitness for purposes to three factors: aims and assumptions; processes and outcomes have also produced what I will call an amplitude framework for evaluating student voice in higher education. Amplitude can be understood in the physical sciences field as the power of a signal. The power I am interested in however is the energy with which a signal is carried- the amount or degree to which something extends (i.e. scope or breadth). I am not therefore conceiving of power as volume. Loud voices might get heard, but they do not necessarily get responded to. Furthermore, loud voices can drown other voices out and the student voice initiatives that I am advocating are ones where there is an equal relationship between academics and students, therefore no one voice should dominate. I am therefore defining amplitude as the extent to which student voice has a transformative impact on the teaching and learning structures and spaces within a higher education institution. This definition has resonance with other student voice researchers who have referred to amplifying student voice in the context of both compulsory education (Mitra, 2008; Beattie, 2012) and post-compulsory education (Cook-Sather, 2012). Mitra (2008) talks of student voice initiatives that help youth move in a 'positive direction' and to 'participate deeply' reflecting a desire for the scope and breadth of student voice initiatives to be significant in terms of movement and depth. Beattie (2012) links amplitude to a change in structures (educational relationships and institutions); while Cook-Sather links amplitude to the acoustic that is produced when structures are created that enable student voice to fill their spaces. Amplitude can therefore be understood as the extent to which educational relationships and institutions enable student voice to contribute to the acoustics of existing spaces and co-construct new acoustic spaces.

In applying the amplitude framework to the PIE project I have shown that although the reach of its processes were quite strong in terms of the extent to which participants had opportunities to influence and make choices; its reach in terms of the extent to which participants bought into the aims and objectives and to which transformation occurred was limited by the fitness of the aims and objectives, processes and outcomes. I was right to believe that the PIE project was not very successful, and now I better understand why.

Although there are no other evaluation frameworks in the field of student voice in higher education to compare the Amplitude framework to, it does have similarities to the framework proposed by the International Collaboration for Participatory Health Research (ICPHR) for evaluating the extent to which stakeholders are included in health research. ICPHR (2013) identified six concepts of validity in inclusive health research which I believe can be mapped very well to the amplitude framework (see Table 5):

- Participatory validity- the extent to which all stakeholders are able to take an active part in the research process to the full extent possible;
- Intersubjective validity: The extent to which research is viewed as being credible and meaningful by the stakeholders from a variety of perspectives;
- Contextual validity: The extent to which the research relates to the local situation;
- Catalytic validity: the extent to which the research is useful in terms of presenting new possibilities for social action;

- Ethical validity the extent to which the research outcomes and the changes exerted on people are sound and just;
- Empathic validity: the extent to which the research has increased empathy among participants.

< Table 5 about here>

One attractiveness of mapping a student voice evaluation framework to the framework proposed by ICPHR is that its' consideration of ethics addresses the very core principles of student voice. ICHPR argue that ethics is an important consideration in participatory health research because it requires researchers to address the collective process of knowledge production and in particular the issues of power and status differentials. Collectivity and relational knowledge are key components of student voice initiatives and yet the realities and complexities of academics and students genuinely sharing power are rarely debated in depth. In the context of student voice work, it may not be so appropriate to evaluate the 'justness' of outcomes. Instead it may be more relevant to consider the fitness of the processes and whether they could genuinely enable universities and their staff to respond to student feedback. If the processes are not fit for purpose in this context, then it may be unethical to run the student voice project and lead students to believe that change is possible, when in reality it is not.

The similarity between the Amplitude Framework and the ICHPR framework suggests that the Amplitude Framework has some face validity in terms of evaluating the extent to which students are genuinely included in student voices initiatives in higher education. The added value of the Amplitude Framework over the ICHPR framework, however, is that if offers more detail on what exactly should be evaluated in an educational context (aims, processes, outcomes) and the criteria against which these factors might be judged (reach and fitness for purpose). More work needs to be done in finessing the granularity of these criteria, so that judgments regarding 'extent' can be more nuanced.

Although the amplitude framework has been distilled from two of my own student voice projects, I believe that it could be applied to other student voice projects. The questions asked will vary depending on the context and the exact nature of the project. For example, in evaluating the reach of outcomes it may be appropriate for a project to ask: to what extent was the impact of the project sustained over the longer term. Mihans et al. (2009) for example, collected evaluation data immediately after the project and then three months later. Alternatively, it could be appropriate to ask the question: To what extent have students outside of the project benefitted from the outcomes of the project? For example, the students in the project described by Moore et al. (2009) talk about the extent to which they believed their input to helping their tutor re-design a TESOL course would benefit future students of the course. Nevertheless it would be useful to apply the Amplitude Framework to an evaluation of student voice projects that are not underpinned by the principles of participatory research in the way that the PAIRS and PIE projects were in order to increase our understanding of both the face validity and generalisability of the framework. In addition, it would be helpful to try the Amplitude Framework with a range of student voice initiatives that reflect the range of different purposes that were identified in the introduction to this paper (e.g. student as

partner; change-agent or producer) in order to test my argument that different kinds of student voice projects do not necessarily need different kinds of evaluation frameworks.

Finally, although the impetus for seeking to develop an evaluation framework was my personal and subjective comparisons of two student voice projects that I have been involved in, I am not necessarily advocating that the resulting Amplitude Framework should be used to compare one student voice project to another. Whilst there were some similarities between the PIE and PAIRS project described in this paper, such as the use of participatory methods and the receipt of institutional funding (with the concomitant focus on informing wider teaching and learning practices), there were also differences, such as the level of focus and the type of students which may make comparisons unhelpful. Therefore, there is probably less value in asking if one student voice initiative is 'better' than another than asking if a student voice initiative had the intended impact. More work needs to be done to ascertain the extent to which explicit and well grounded evaluation frameworks such as the Amplitude Framework outlined in this paper enable higher education institutions to do so.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to contribute to the development of frameworks for evaluating student voice projects in higher education by offering a critical evaluation of two student voice initiatives. From this evaluation I have developed and proposed an Amplitude Framework for evaluation focusing on the reach and fitness of the aims, process and outcomes of a student voice initiative. Student voice initiatives in higher education tend to be conceived of as a 'good thing to do' which means that the issues and tensions surrounding the field (i.e. power relationships and ethics) are not always critiqued or problematised. The development of Amplitude evaluation framework makes an original contribution to student voice work in higher education by enabling a wide-ranging and rigorous critique of such issues and tensions. I believe that the framework could also be used at a variety of levels: e.g. institution, department, programme or module. This would however need more work to confirm.

Notes on contributor

Jane Seale is Professor of Inclusive Education at Exeter University. Jane's methodological interest is the development and evaluation of participatory research methods that promote voice and empowerment.

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Notes

[1] http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100407215947/http://bis.gov.uk/policies/higher-education/students/student-listening-programme

[2] http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/page/47411916/The%20Student%20Voice

[3]http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/file/fetch/47438575/Student%20Voice%20Framework%20Mapping.pdf

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Project	PAIRS	PIE
Date	2007-8	2011-2012
Location	University A	University B
Funding	Internally funded	Internally funded
Role of researcher/author	Researcher was a tutor on one of the postgraduate programmes	Researcher only, no teaching role in the programme of focus
Perceived problem that student voice project aimed to address	Students are not involved in the design and delivery of staff development and CPD materials/activities	Students have little choice over how institutions evaluate their learning experiences (standard evaluation questionnaires etc.) There is a risk that standard methods may not capture what the students want to say and in particular the things they feel are important
Organisational level of focus	Departmental focus	Programme focus
Type of learning experience	General learning experiences	The first year learning experience
Level of study	Undergraduate and Postgraduate students	Undergraduate students
Discipline area	Education	Education
Sample population size	300+	130 (65 second years in phase one and 65 first years in phase two)
Total number of participants	20	11 (+15)
	6.6%	20%

Table 1: Overview of PAIRS and PIE student voice projects

Evaluation questions	PAIRS	PIE
Were students given information to inform decision on whether and how to participate	✓	✓
Did students have a choice regarding the 'roles' they could take in the project?	✓	✓
Were students given a choice over the methods they could use to contribute their voice?	✓	✓
Were students informed of the results of study	✓	✓

Table 2: To what extent were students informed and have opportunities to choose whether and how they participated?

Evaluation questions	PAIRS	PIE
Were students involved in the development of research proposal/bid?	x	x
Were students involved in the design of voice capture tools?	x	✓
Were students able to contribution their voice/experiences?	✓	✓
Were students involved in the analysis of voice?	✓	✓
Were students involved in the dissemination of project results?	✓	✓

Table 3: The extent to which students were engaged in the whole process from design through to dissemination

ACTIVITIES	PAIRS	PIE
DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES	INTERNAL TO THE UNIVERSITY Project report placed on central university teaching and learning website and e-prints repository Project was the focus of a 'good practice' lunch time seminar and slides were placed on central university website and on Slideshare (1745 views) The student advisory group decided they wanted to place all the project resources, including student case studies on a wiki for sharing with any internal or external person. One of the student participants was paid to create and maintain the wiki	INTERNAL TO THE UNIVERSITY Project poster at institutional annual teaching and learning conference
	EXTERNAL TO THE UNIVERSITY Project leader and one student co-researcher co-presented a paper on the processes of the project at an external conference. The slides were placed on the conference website.	EXTERNAL TO THE UNIVERSITY Project leader, programme tutors and one student co-researcher presented a paper on the processes of the project at an external conference. Project leader, programme tutors and one student co-researcher wrote a journal paper reflecting on their experiences of the project
ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES	INTERNAL TO THE UNIVERSITY Within the school of education two staff development workshops were held- 1) the PhD programme leader used the stories from PGR students as cases within a research supervisor development workshop 2) Stories from all PAIRS participants were shared within a departmental staff development workshop focusing on inclusion	INTERNAL TO THE UNIVERSITY Nothing to date

Table 4: To what extent were processes put in place to enable the intended reach of the projects?

FACTORS/CRITERIA	REACH	FITNESS
AIMS AND ASSUMPTIONS	The extent to which all participants 'bought' in to the aims, identified problems and assumptions of the student voice project. *INTERSUBJECTIVE VALIDITY*	The extent to which the assumptions on which the student voice project is based are accurate or evidenced based. *CONTEXTUAL VALIDITY*
PROCESS	The extent to which all participants in the project had opportunities to influence, make choices and have a voice. *PARTICIPATORY VALIDITY*	The extent to which processes are put in place/ planned into the student voice project to enable meaningful responses to the student voice The extent to which university personnel have the power or are willing to act on student voices *ETHICAL VALIDITY*
OUTCOMES	Extent to which transformation occurs for both students and tutors *CATALYTIC VALIDITY*	The extent to which students and staff understand one another better *EMPATHIC VALIDITY*

Table 5: The amplitude framework for evaluating student voice in higher education