Listening to the Students' Voice as a Governance Tool in Higher Education

Elena Bandiera
University of Padua

Sara Miccichè
University of Siena

Carlo Terzaroli
University of Florence

LISTENING TO THE STUDENTS' VOICE AS A GOVERNANCE TOOL IN HIGHER EDUCATION[1]

Elena Bandiera, student, Degree Course in Education Services Management and Continuous Education, University of Padua, elena.bandiera.1@studenti.unipd.it

Sara Miccichè, student, Degree Course in Education Science and Pedagogical Consultancy in Organisations, University of Siena, micciche3@student.unisi.it

Carlo Terzaroli, Ph.D. Student in Education Science and Psychology, University of Florence, carlo.terzaroli@unifi.it

Introduction

The work, carried out as part of the International Conference *Transforming Teaching Methods and Assessment in Higher Education*, held at the University of Padua on 4-5-6 April 2016, started with a sharing of each member of the group's experiences regarding listening to the *Students' Voice*. On this matter, each of the work group's participants shared their own direct experience of listening, in order to be able to reflect together on the various meanings and on the experience that this aspect of university life could have. Below is a description of each of our experiences.

Elena, University of Padua

My Degree Course does not have many students who attend lessons and this is often an advantage for the relationship that is created with the teacher. It has happened more than once that teachers would ask us students to express their opinions, ideas and perplexities about the teaching programmes, in order for them to organise teaching and activities better.

In particular, I would like to talk about the experience I had during the "Evaluation and certification of skills" course. This course required active participation from the students and therefore an open, direct relationship was created with the teacher. On the last day of the course, on the request of the head of degree courses, and helped by the teacher of the "Evaluation and certification of skills" course, we had a thorough discussion about the progress of the entire course.

The students described what they considered were the learning results achieved, the strengths and weaknesses for each course in the two-year part of the degree. Each student had the possibility and time to give their own opinion, and this could allow the teachers to improve the quality of the degree course, wherever possible. While reflecting on the events, and talking with other colleagues-students from other university courses out of personal curiosity, I discovered that this exchange of ideas is not at all frequent, and for many is totally

---

[1] This article is the result of common work in the *Introduction.* The section *The Students' Voice: an exchange of ideas* is attributed to Elena Bandiera; the sections *The Students' Voice: key factors in our perspective* and *Listening to the Students' Voice: some possible effects* is attributed to Carlo Terzaroli; the section *The Tuning Fork: a symbol of listening to the Students' Voice* is attributed to Sara Miccichè.

unthinkable. The impression I got was that often teachers are not willing to take on this type of discussion that can be extremely constructive.

Sara, University of Siena

My department in Arezzo (a secondary campus of the University of Siena) has adopted a "policy" in the last two years that is based on the importance of the students' voice: we are a part of the Governance, we are represented in all the bodies and we offer tutoring to students (exchange and support among peers). Thanks to the department head, Professor Loretta Fabbri, who truly believes in active student citizenship, we have been able to start creating an "adult to adult" relationship with the teachers, with whom we collaborate, we talk, we organise workshops, and research work according to a community of practice approach. Through some research conducted with six colleagues and the department head herself, a work began, that is still in progress, about increasing "Student Citizenship." We checked the presence of experience in other Italian universities, we explored the topic on our campus through semi-structured interviews with both students and the teaching body and we continue to help university life grow by listening to requests from students. The result of this work was CampusLab: a space of 14 classrooms that are all available to the student for work groups, collaborative study and informal meetings with both university teachers and with guests. We are trying to change education, focusing work on making the student a central point and not passive or peripheral.

Carlo, University of Florence

The experience of listening to the students' voice that I would like to share for the topic *Listening to the Students' Voice* is connected to the Adult Education and Continuous Education Foundation Course, taught by Professor Federighi and Professor Boffo as part of the Degree Course LM-57 in Adult Education and Continuous Education Science and Pedagogical Science.

The course involved the participation of us students in a research project on the labour market in the social economy sector and on the employability of students from the above Degree Course. The research was part of the European SALM *Skills and Labour Market to Raise Youth Employment* project, with the aim of understanding the mismatch between university and the job world in order to improve the degree course with regarding to employability.

After a preliminary theoretical and methodological introduction, the course included the direct involvement of the students in identifying companies in the social economy sector that were willing to take part in an interview. For this, each of the students identified a company, and then created a contact by presenting the project and the research goals: in this way, about 50 companies were researched.

Secondly, each student organised a meeting during which a semi-structured interview was conducted that focused on investigating employment potential in the company, then looking at the areas of intervention, the areas of development and the potential working opportunities. At the end of the case study, carried out by analysing the interviews, a report was drafted that traced the research programme and provided an interpretation of the employment prospects in the company involved, as well as a map of the skills required to work in that company, something that the university could respond to.

This was very interesting as we students were able to directly participate in the research process. In fact, it was research in the field that provided an important opportunity of knowledge in the world of employment, but was also a means to suggest and propose elements for improving the course and the structure of the Adult Education Science curriculum.

The Students' Voice: An exchange of ideas

The main argument of our discussion is "active listening to the student's voice." Before focusing on content, we feel we must state something: in spite of the fact that the group included members from different Italian universities (Florence, Padua and Siena), we found ourselves to be in harmony when discussing the matter, using a common language, and discovering that the fact that we came from the same area of study, i.e. Education, allowed us to have had several similar experiences, mainly, in our opinion, that of having the opportunity to be in contact with sensitive teachers who pay attention to this topic.

Each member of the group had different positive experiences of active listening by teachers. In several cases we had the possibility to give our opinions, to compare them by expressing ideas in a constructive, useful manner, to allow the teacher to improve his own work and that of his colleagues, but also to generally improve the student's learning experience. When talking, we agreed on some characteristics that were important for us, that allow greater and better listening to the Students' Voice:
- the size of the class (listening and discussing is simpler with smaller classes);
- the real, positive relationship that is created between the teacher and the class;
- the level of responsibility and the willingness of the students asked to take part in the dialogue;
- the dialogue and the willingness to discuss among peers (students)

The entire group agreed on the fact that the opportunities for dialogue and discussion between students and teachers are much simpler and spontaneous when there is a small group. In this way, even the most reserved students feel able to give their opinions, with the result that everyone feels included and part of a group, which is "democratic" in a certain sense.

Each teacher has his own relational style, which may be open, participatory, cooperative, and so on, but we all agree that if a teacher is open to discussion and negotiation of some aspects of learning, this allows the student to acquire the same style too. We believe that being open to discussion and listening leads to active, involved participation by the student.

What we have said above, leads us to say that if a space is allocated for discussion and listening, the student will feel responsible and will more easily express his desire to take part in important situations for his student life, but also for those who come after him.

The last point, concerning the relationship and dialogue among peers, found us agreeing with the statement that the students' voice is listened to more and taken more into consideration when it is the expression of a common idea rather than an individual's. In order for a shared idea to be created that can be brought to a teacher's attention, the students must talk and share their ideas and opinions.

The Students' Voice: Key Factors from Our Point of View

As part of the group work carried out at the International Conference, the points of the common meaning of *Students' Voice* were then identified to find the shared elements for deeper discussion. Listening to the *Students' Voice* is in fact a vital tool for the governance of universities, as well as for the construction of a sense of belonging for the students. In this sense, we carried out an analysis of some strategic elements for the creation of higher education paths that are moving in the direction of a shared planning of policies, paths and educational relationships.

In our opinion, there are spaces and realms in which listening to the students' voice could improve the quality of education and the efficacy of learning results in a decisive manner. A community that works together, that defines procedures and moments for mutual listening (between governance, teachers and students) and that cooperates to appoint strategies that can be an important start for innovation in learning paths and the universities themselves.

The realms shown in Table 1 are some essential points around which we based our thoughts. The aim was to ask the teachers and institutional leaders present some questions about the possible actions that could be taken at various levels. As we can see from the table, listening to the *Students' Voice* can be traced to a *macro* institutional level, with regard to the involvement of the students themselves in governance and in course planning. In this sense, organising opportunities for discussions about degree course structure can be used as moments for shared reflection in the study community, about prospects and about improvements to enact. The question that emerges, however, concerns the opening up of the course and the teachers to accepting these suggestions: how many are willing to change their courses (and teaching methods) according to the emerging needs of students and the world of employment?

Secondly, at the *middle* level of each course, the possibility of publishing the evaluations of each course more clearly and transparently was analysed. In fact, it is already possible to view the results of end of course evaluations written by students, however they are not always easy to access and they are not always used in planning future study plans. This action could have some repercussions on the professional future of the teachers, however, so what is the impact of a negative evaluation of his own course for a teacher?

Lastly, with regard to the *micro* level of the teacher-student and student-student relationships, the possibility of identifying two different actions for listening to the *Students' Voice* was discussed. Firstly, the establishment of a single reference point (a kind of mentor from the teacher side) who works within the degree course so that all the teachers of all courses can use the same teaching methods for active participation and sharing of teaching activities.

Some good examples and effective practices were highlighted for this: in spite of this, the main difficulty that emerges is the disorganisation that is created by the non-homogeneity of participatory and listening methods for student opinions, rather than the absence of good practices. Also, with regard to the relationship among peers, the possibility of creating structured opportunities was highlighted, so that representatives can have feedback and contributions from the entire student population. The difficulties of active participation by all students in the daily work of representative bodies can be improved through structured listening to the *Students' Voice* among peers: student representation committees can be set up, as well as tutorships, so levels are brought closer to the students' needs.

FATTORI CHIAVE

AMBITO	ESEMPIO
COINVOLGIMENTO NELLA GOVERNANCE E NELLA PIANIFICAZIONE DEI CORSI DI STUDI	• Costruire maggiori occasioni di incontro tra docenti, studenti e mondo del lavoro, così da creare un confronto allo scopo di chiedere agli studenti come poter modificare i Corsi di Studi nella prospettiva del lavoro. • Quanti sono disposti a cambiare il proprio insegnamento in base ai nuovi bisogni del mondo del lavoro?
PUBBLICAZIONE DELLE VALUTAZIONI DEGLI INSEGNAMENTI E DEL CORSO DI STUDI	• Poter consultare maggiormente gli esiti delle valutazioni della didattica; • Discutere con i docenti sui possibili cambiamenti da attuare. • Quale impatto ha sul futuro di un docente una valutazione negativa?
RELAZIONE DOCENTE-STUDENTI IN UNA PROSPETTIVA DI *MENTORSHIP*	• Avere un punto di riferimento che definisca, per tutti i Corsi, le stesse linee di partecipazione e condivisione dell'attività didattica, uniformando tra i diversi docenti e insegnamenti forme e modalità di partecipazione degli studenti
RELAZIONE TRA PARI CON STUDENTI DI DIVERSI LIVELLI (*TUTORSHIP*)	• Creare occasioni, anche strutturate, affinchè i rappresentanti nei Comitati possano avere feedback e contributi da tutta la popolazione studentesca.

SCOPE	EXAMPLE
INVOLVEMENT IN THE GOVERNANCE AND PLANNING OF THE DEGREE COURSES	Creating more opportunities for meetings between teachers, students and the world of employment, in order to create a comparison so we can ask the students how to change the degree courses with a view to employment. How many are willing to change their teaching according to the new needs emerging from the world of work?
PUBLICATION OF TEACHING AND COURSE ASSESSMENTS	Being able to consult the teaching evaluation results more; Discuss possible changes to be made with teachers. What impact does a negative evaluation have on a teacher's future?
TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS SEEN AS A *MENTORSHIP*	Having a reference point that defines the same lines of sharing teaching activities, for all courses, standardising ways and modes of student participation among the various teachers and courses.
RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PEERS WITH STUDENTS OF DIFFERENT	Creating structured opportunities so that representatives in committees can have

LEVELS (*TUTORSHIPS*)	feedback and contributions from the entire student population.

Figure 1 - The work group's slide on the key factors of listening to the Students' Voice

Listening to the Students' Voice: Some Possible Effects

We then went to observe and share some possible effects of listening to the *Students' Voice* from our point of view as students. First of all, what can be taken from these actions is an increase in the sense of community and belonging to the university, that is a stimulus for the student to progress along his path and more care in the paths, activities and spaces. This is also an incentive to study (for students) and to work (for teachers) that may also increase the sense of group and caring for respective daily activities: everyone can benefit in the university from a climate of trust and listening that can be created within the space

The provision of opportunities for listening (and actually enactment of them through specific measures of manifested needs) may also be a stimulus to increase communication skills in the students, who will be encouraged to take part personally and be an active and participatory part of the place they live in.

In addition, with regard to the evaluation of each course, the spreading of an evaluation culture may make teachers and students more responsible, also encouraging forms of mutual listening and collaboration when building new courses. What listening to the *Students' Voice* can reveal is the construction of a shared learning contract among all the players who take part in the life and actions of the university, in addition to creating more ties between the university and the world of employment. The world of employment is in fact the arrival point of the students' life path, which increasingly require that higher education plans study courses that can help them face the challenges of life and work in the short, mid and long term.

6

POSSIBLE EFFECTS
• Transmitting a sense of community and group; • Encouragement to work and feel part of the group you belong to; • A stimulus for communication skills, at institutional level also encourages students to take part and be an active part of the place they live in; • Diffusion of an evaluation culture that makes teachers and students responsible; • Creation of a shared learning contract and an educational report. • To aid the construction of degree courses that are better aimed at the job market.

**Figure 2 - The work group's slide on the possible effects of listening to the Students'
Voice**

The Tuning Fork: the symbol of listening to the Students' Voice

The choice of this tool is focused on the inherent meaning of the object: This small piece of
metal was once used to tune an entire orchestra. Via 440 Hz it reproduces the so-called
"perfect LA," that all instruments must tune themselves to, in order to reproduce full
harmony. We believe in this: like many musicians, with their different instruments, notes,
parts to play, we have a final goal of creating a perfect symphony, where everyone has his
place, and his part. In this sense, it is vital and essential to listen to everyone, students
included, so that the final work is harmonious and filled with meaning.

7

Figure 3 - The Tuning Fork, the symbol of listening to the Students' Voice