Getting the blend right: listening to the wide student voice to enhance the online learning experience

Agnieszka Herdan, Dawn Reilly, Liz Warren
University of Greenwich

Abstract

The Teaching Excellence Framework has brought the retention of year one students and their initial experience of higher education (HE) into sharp focus. This project provides the opportunity for students to act as change agents, actively involved in the design of their programmes and therefore empowered to enhance their experience, in the area of online learning. Despite its importance to the overall student experience, where it is part of a blended-learning course design, online learning is not always addressed in student feedback. This case study focuses on year one students in three accounting and finance-related programmes and sets out how we are exploring students' experience of using online learning platforms in the areas of mathematics, writing and accounting. However, the project also highlights challenges associated with asking students to evaluate in this way aspects of their HE experience.

Introduction

The student voice has never been more important in higher education (HE). Universities want to know if there are specific courses to which they should make improvements, so as to optimise future National Student Survey (NSS) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) scores. We need to provide students with opportunities to make their voice heard, specifically in order to prepare for NSS Questions 23 – "*I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course*" – and 24 – *"Staff value students' views and opinions about the course"* (NSS, 2017). Whilst universities may focus on the year three provision, a programme of study begins in year one and so we also ask our students in years one and two for feedback on both their courses and the support offered by the institution. With first-year continuation data now under the TEF spotlight, it is more important than ever to provide our students with a good year one structure which not only prepares them for the higher-level courses to follow but also provides an enjoyable initial experience of university. Over a period of seven months, this project has therefore asked year one students from three accounting and finance-related degrees at this post-1992 university for their views on three online learning platforms used in their programmes as part of a blended-learning approach. The students all study a common first year, into which the online labs have been introduced as outlined in Table 1.

Online lab	Course	Date introduced	% of assessment in related course	Dates of online assessment
MyMathLab	Quantitative methods	2007	20%	Nov 17 – Dec 17
MyWritingLab	Personal and professional development	2009	10%	Nov 17 – Feb 18
MyAccountingLab	Introduction to financial accounting	2014	20%	Feb 18 – Mar 18

Table 1. The three online labs

Table 1 shows that the first lab was introduced into the year one structure eleven years ago. The time is therefore right, if not overdue, to examine these platforms from the students' perspective. The project gives students a voice so that they can act as change agents, influencing the way online learning platforms are used in their programmes and adding to the growing body of research which explores how educators listen to the student voice (Seale, 2010; Dunne and Zandstra, 2011; Seale *et al.*, 2015). Complementing the work of Burnapp *et al.* (2018), this study considers a project where blended learning is already being used, rather than exploring new ways to integrate online learning.

Students are already encouraged by the University to act as partners in learning, as there are opportunities throughout the year for them to give feedback on all parts of their programme and individual courses. Specifically, students can do this through termly programme representative liaison meetings, via online course evaluation surveys and in their regular personal tutor meetings. However, these interactions cover all aspects of the student experience and the project team was eager to focus on students' views regarding the online platforms and to provide a real opportunity for students to act as change agents for their programmes. The aim of this case study is not to present students' detailed views on the online labs. Instead, we outline how we tried to listen to the wider student voice rather than to that of only a smaller, albeit representative, group of students. Our case study therefore further complements the work of Burnapp *et al.* (*op.cit.*), who recruited a team of paid project partners from the student population. We discuss the challenges we encountered in adopting our approach and how we tried to overcome them.

Any institution will need to address the challenge of choosing whether to act upon feedback or to explain to students why there will not be a change, for, if students feel that their views are ignored, they can become demotivated, even alienated (Bovill *et al.*, 2011; Seale, *op.cit.*). However, there is an assumption that individual students will want to provide feedback on their courses and that they are in a position to contribute to the student voice. This brings us to a second challenge associated with the student voice agenda, where an institution wants to listen to the wider student voice rather than fall into the trap of having selective partnerships (Bryson *et al.*, 2016). Moving to the universal mode in this way highlights the problem that not all students may want to participate. They might be uncomfortable about taking on the roles of co-creator or commentator, preferring lecturers to

design their courses (Bovill *et al.*, *op.cit.*). Unfortunately, however, they might equally be indifferent and lack the motivation to contribute feedback (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009).

Methodology

The project complied with all the necessary ethics requirements of working with students and ethics approval was granted by the University on the basis both of a sound approach to protecting the students from unnecessary risks and a rigorous data protection process.

The theoretical framework for the project came from Dunne and Zandstra's (2011) model for students as change agents. This model recognises the range of ways in which students may be integrated into the process of change and, specifically, focuses on whether it is the university or the students who drive change. The model also makes a useful distinction between two ways in which students might play the role of change agents: via active engagement in bringing about change or through making their voice heard so that the university can bring in change. In accordance with Dunne and Zandstra's (*op.cit.*, p.17) model, the current project involves *"students as evaluators of their HE experience"* because the University has driven the project and asked for student feedback on the online labs so that students can make their views known to faculty without themselves acting to bring in change.

Having established this particular emphasis, we were able to focus on addressing how best to integrate students into the process. Since we needed feedback on a range of aspects of the students' programme, we had to provide them with opportunities to give it and thus chose to use the year one online labs as the means. Then, obviously, we needed to encourage students to participate. (In this study, 'participation' is measured by the numbers of students who engaged with the various stages of the project.) When they did, we had to listen to and act upon their comments, making such improvements as we deemed necessary for enhancement of our provision.

Collecting the data for this project involved several stages, which included both a historic reflection and primary data collection from the students who used the online platforms during the academic year 2017-18. From reading previous years' course evaluation surveys, information from personal tutor meetings and the notes taken in student liaison meetings, it became apparent that there was variability in the student opinion regarding the three platforms. From this analysis, a project team of five academic staff was established; it included the leaders of two courses which use the online labs, the Faculty's Director of Learning and Teaching and the Programme Leader. Following a meeting with Pearson, the platform provider, the academic team scoped out the project, with its aim established as: 'to improve the self-efficacy, experience and retention of the students'. We agreed that we should use a survey to investigate students' expectations and perceptions of online products before they started the process of using the platforms. We would then be able to compare and contrast the actual student experience for the three different platforms by running additional surveys later in the academic year. As well as these wide surveys of views across the cohort, depth would be added via student discussion forums. Both the academic team and Pearson were keen to get the students actively involved and open to changing the materials and assessment process if the project concluded this was necessary, thereby

giving students a real opportunity to make their voice heard to motivate change (Dickinson and Fox, 2016).

The process of engaging the students as change agents in this way unfolded as shown in Figure 1.
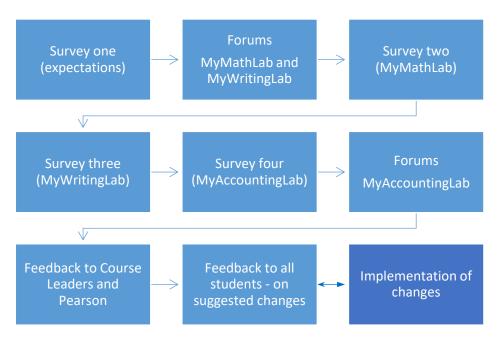
```
┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐
│   Survey one    │ ──▶ │     Forums      │ ──▶ │   Survey two    │
│  (expectations) │     │  MyMathLab and  │     │   (MyMathLab)   │
│                 │     │  MyWritingLab   │     │                 │
└─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘
                                                          │
        ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
        ▼
┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐
│  Survey three   │ ──▶ │   Survey four   │ ──▶ │     Forums      │
│ (MyWritingLab)  │     │(MyAccountingLab)│     │ MyAccountingLab │
│                 │     │                 │     │                 │
└─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘
                                                          │
        ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
        ▼
┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐
│ Feedback to     │ ──▶ │  Feedback to all│ ◀─▶ │ Implementation  │
│ Course Leaders  │     │  students - on  │     │   of changes    │
│ and Pearson     │     │ suggested changes│    │                 │
└─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘
```

Figure 1. Data collection and feedback process

Survey One was co-designed by the academic team and Pearson to ensure that we were gathering data relevant to both sides. This approach continued with the later surveys. The year one cohort included 164 students across three undergraduate programmes, all within the Department of Accounting and Finance, and, as previously mentioned, all with a common first year. Survey One – the longest – gathered demographic information about the students, their use of online platforms prior to entering HE and their perceptions/expectations of how using online platforms in their programme would benefit them. Survey One took place before the students started to use any of the platforms.

Following Survey One, we held our first set of student forums. We divided the students into three groups, according to their programme of study, because there might be differences between the respective 'groupthinks'. (The students are taught in seminar groups according to their programme.) Each forum group had a student facilitator. The students were asked for more detailed opinions on the use of the MyMathLab and MyWritingLab platforms only, as MyAccountingLab had not yet started. The focus of the forums was on what students thought worked well, what did not work so well and what they would change. The forums were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. It was important to follow the student voice across the academic year, because students can often be influenced by one event and this can bias their opinion – for example, if an assessment is found to be challenging.

Following the completion of the various lab components we conducted the later shorter surveys. Here we collected data only on what the students thought about the use of the three labs, so that we could compare initial student perceptions against the reality of the experience. The forums process was then repeated, to capture the opinions of the third

online platform, MyAccountingLab. This followed the same set-up process as the first forum, with three groups running according to the programme, each with a student facilitator.

Findings and Challenges: Student engagement with the project

Table 2 shows the levels of student engagement with the various stages of the project.

	N	Survey one	Forum one	Survey two	Survey three	Survey four	Forum two
Number of students	**164**	140	46	99	56	18	18

Table 2. Levels of student engagement

Students were sent an emailed link to Survey One and this was followed up with a reminder in a lecture, when they were given time to complete the survey. A very encouraging 140 out of 164 (85.4%) students completed Survey One. The same process – of sending an email link and reminding students in a lecture – was followed for the later surveys. However, the downward trend in the number of completed surveys and the second forum was disappointing, although common in research projects. We spent a great deal of time explaining to students why being a change agent was important. To lessen the risk of students' thinking there was no point in participating because the result would have no impact upon their own studies, we gave examples of changes that had been made in response to the students' voice from previous years and how the current cohort had benefited from these changes.

Since Survey One was at the beginning of the students' year one they had not been asked to participate in other surveys. That, at the end of term one, they were asked to complete *five* course evaluation surveys, might explain why some were not eager to participate in Survey Two at the beginning of the second term, an explanation which is supported by the following student comment:

"There were too many surveys that I was asked to complete this year, and I was tired of completing them."

Students also gave the following reasons for not engaging in the feedback process:

"I had intended to complete the surveys; however, I left them till too late as I was submitting coursework and studying for exams, which took up most of my time."

Survey Four occurred when students were engaged in revision sessions, building up to their exams.

"You should have included filling out the surveys at the end of a seminar so that the students, like myself, would find it easy to complete."

The last comment serves to explain the high number of students who participated in Survey One as compared to the lower numbers of the last survey; Survey One was completed during a lecture, after an explanation of the project. However, student comments suggest

that our explanation could have gone into more detail about the role of students in the project:

"There was not much to talk about."

"I did not have many problems with the labs; therefore, I did not participate with the surveys."

These comments provide some evidence that, where students did not think there were any problems with the online platforms, they felt they had nothing of value to add and did not participate. It is also possible that not all students viewed their own opinions as being very important. However, this was an opportunity for all students to act as change agents and these final two comments do suggest that we did not clearly explain the importance to us of hearing the broad student voice.

Discussion

There has been an increasing debate as to whether students see themselves as customers (Saunders, 2015) – understandable in the era of marketisation of HE. However, it has long been agreed that we should be moving students away from this narrative by encouraging them to be change agents (Kay *et al.*, 2010). We have set out to do this by working in partnership with students to try to solve some previously-identified problems with the online labs (Lea, 2016). Now we have our initial data-finding, it is fair to say that the feedback received from students – and via the two forums in particular – is insightful and hugely helpful to us as we consider changes to the way we use the online labs. Specifically, as a partner in the project, the provider will have access to our analysis of student feedback and can thus improve its products on the basis of the survey responses and discussions in the forums. However, as with all projects, one of the most difficult elements has been to encourage students to engage. Students want their voice to be heard, but it is difficult to find a vehicle by means of which you can hear the broader voice, rather than that of the same keen students who volunteer for all activities. Paying them is a possibility, but this can itself create problems as budgets are squeezed in the current HE environment. Moving to a universal mode is encouraged because it is inclusive, but more consideration is required on how we can achieve this. If students are going to be considered as change agents under the universal mode, we have to find a way to receive feedback from everyone, even if they are happy with what we are investigating. Otherwise, the feedback we receive will be biased because we are excluding the opinion of many.

Where there is low participation, we face the challenge of how best to act on feedback received, for we must consider how any changes we might make would affect the wider student population. Representing, as we do, an institution with a commitment to widening participation in HE, we recognise that our students sometimes juggle commitments to study, paid work and family. Whilst it is completely understandable that they might not participate, it is precisely these students whose views we need to know and understand, because the flexibility and potential benefits of online learning are particularly important and relevant to them.

Conclusion: Lessons learnt

The project has used Dunne and Zandstra's model (*op.cit.*) for students as change agents and identified challenges associated with asking students to evaluate their HE experience.

With the current incarnation of NSS (2017) questions on the student voice, universities are focusing more and more upon how best to provide students with course-feedback opportunities and then, in response, to communicate what they will do. The obvious challenge for universities is to bring in appropriate change and to communicate that change to students. However, this case study has further identified that we increasingly face the problem of how to engage students in the feedback process so that the student voice across the wider student population may be heard.

Our project also highlights the risk that HE institutions can ask students to participate in too many course feedback and evaluation surveys and thereby provoke 'survey fatigue', not only resulting in non-responses but also affecting the quality of the feedback which is received (Clark, 2008). We certainly need to recognise that using surveys in our institution may become increasingly difficult because the University is using this platform widely, to gather student feedback throughout the whole year. The problem therefore facing us as we pursue new projects will be how to encourage students to participate in large numbers. One lesson that we have learnt is that it is best to ask students to complete surveys within a timetabled activity; another is that by emphasising their role as change agents, we can unintentionally discourage some students from participating where they are already happy with their HE experience and so see no reason to provide feedback. Consequently, it is vitally important that we explain clearly to our students that they are not only change agents but also partners in their learning journey with us.

Reference list

Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A. and Felton, P. (2011) 'Students as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design, and curricula: implications for academic developers.' *International Journal for Academic Development,* 16(2), 133-145. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2011.568690 (Accessed: 27 April 2018).

Burnapp, D., Farmer, R., Reese, S. and Stepniak, A. (2018) 'Co-creation, contexts, and complexity: a case study concerning blended learning.' *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change,* 4(1). Available at: https://journals.gre.ac.uk/index.php/studentchangeagents/article/view/649/pdf (Accessed: 30 April 2018).

Clark, T. (2008) '*We're Over-Researched Here!* Exploring Accounts of Research Fatigue within Qualitative Research Engagements.' *Sociology,* 42(5). Available at: http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0038038508094573 (Accessed: 10 April 2018).

Dickinson, L. and Fox, A. (2016) 'Who owns the student voice? A study of students' perceptions of student voice in higher education.' *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change,* 2(1). Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.21100/jeipc.v2i1.233 (Accessed: 10 April 2018).

Dunne, E. and Zandstra, R. (2011) *Students as change agents: New ways of engaging with learning and teaching in Higher Education.* ESCalate. Available at: http://escalate.ac.uk/8242 (Accessed: 07 February 2018).

Kay, J., Dunne, E. and Hutchinson, J. (2010) *Rethinking the values of Higher Education – students as change agents.* Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

Lea, J. (2016) 'Turning down the volume control on student voice in order to enhance student engagement.' *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal,* 1(1)*.* Available at: https://journals.gre.ac.uk/index.php/raise/rt/captureCite/379/337 (Accessed: 27 April 2018).

Lizzio, A. and Wilson, K. (2009) 'Student participation in university governance: the role conceptions and sense of efficacy of student representatives on departmental committees.' *Studies in Higher Education,* 34(1), 69-84. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802602000 (Accessed: 17 April 2018).

National Student Survey (2017) *National Student Survey – core questionnaire.* Available at: http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/content/NSS2017_Core_Questionnaire.pdf (Accessed: 17 April 2018).

Seale, J. (2010) 'Doing student voice work in higher education: an exploration of the value of participatory methods.' *British Educational Research Journal,* 36(6), 995-1015. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920903342038 (Accessed: 15 January 2018).