

Increasing student voice and empowerment through technology: Not just listening to the voice of the learner but using their digital capabilities to benefit a whole college community.

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Abstract

Perceived as fostering democracy in educational institutions, approaches which encourage student voice are being promoted as supporting greater social equalities and strengthening student's commitment to their learning. Using student voice as a research theme, facilitated through focus groups, research funded by Jisc set out to hear learner views and explore their digital preferences when learning in a vocational context. The aim of this research was to enhance digital student practice by exploring how learners experience, use and wish to work, in a technology rich environment. A literature review was undertaken to inform the research findings which revealed a lack of research on student voice in the FE sector. This article goes some way to address that deficit and focuses on innovative practice, discovered by serendipity, that went beyond the tenets usually described in the literature on student voice. Using a Case study approach this article reports on work underway in one FE Institution where students have been appointed as 'Digi-Pals' and given a key role to embed the use of digital technologies into student and staff practice. Two theoretical lenses namely those focused on technology and the other on student voice are applied to explore innovative practice. The community of Digi-Pal practice is described and recommendations made for further adoption across the FE and Skills sector.

Introduction

When engaged in a large piece of research on behalf of Jisc [Joint information systems committee] the main author of this article met two students and a lecturer who reported on innovative practice in their institution worthy of dissemination. This article explores the rationale for the larger work funded by JISC. The Jisc research privileged student voice and the literature review for this article

focuses on the role of critical theory in providing the founding tenets for the student voice movement. Two critical lenses are then presented to support the exploration of practice in one case study institution where innovative practice was apparent. The case study institution is described as is the research approach, the findings, and analysis before a number of conclusions are reached. The final stage of the article celebrates the discovery of a new approach to student voice which goes beyond involving students in meetings and course assessments to engage them much more fully in the life of the organisation.

Background

Recommendations following the report from FELTAG (Further Education Learning Technology Action Group) as funded by the Department of Business are that 50% of learning in the FE and Skills sector should be delivered online before the end of the current decade (DBIS:2014). The report finds support in the research evidence that identifies the pedagogic advantages of online learning methodologies. And for staff, according to Cook et.al (2008), e learning if used judiciously and by well-trained tutors can help improve feedback and reduce staff engagement on mundane tasks, thus freeing up time. A Jisc report on 'Exploring Tangible Benefits of e-Learning' (2008) describes various examples of student learning gains. Further, there is growing evidence that e-learning can be used to support effective forms of collaborative learning (Coulter et al., 2004, Barrineau, et.al., 2015)

and:

'Learning technology, when astutely used by teachers and providers, can improve FE learners' chances and successfully influence what students do to learn, so that every student can reach their learning potential' (DBIS:2014:6).

Given the policy focus on the increased use of technology Jisc allocated funding to discover what Further Education (FE) learners wanted from their digital experience.

The JISC research

The Jisc funded project entitled the FE and Skills study (www.digitalstudent.jisc/involve.org) mirrored the approach adopted in a Higher Education study, also funded by Jisc, and entitled 'Students'

expectations and experiences of the digital environment'. This research privileged student voice and the FE research is no different, involving initially a desk research literature review on the themes of 'student voice' and 'technologies for learning'. This was followed by 12 focus groups with learners and 6 regional workshops to disseminate and share the research findings. The number of views collected in the project including those of research participants and workshop attendees exceeded 600 staff and students.

The literature review, focused on the FE sector, revealed a lack of academic research on student voice (Pavlaou and Sharp: unpublished: 2014). The literature review did un-earth several pamphlets published by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). It is one of these, namely 'The Journey of Learner Voice' published jointly by LSIS and the National Union of Students (NUS) that we draw on to record the benefits both to the learner and to the organisation when learner voice and student engagement become a central component of college life. The benefits identified include increased participation, improved retention, achievement and progression gain and benefits to organisational reputation with stronger community links established and maintained (LSIS / nus 2013: 7). The change process explored as part of the ambition to give focus to student voice, highlighted a staged approach with the following categories identified:

Inform- where learners are informed about their rights and ways in which to participate in the organisation

Consult-where organisations seek the views of learners and provide feedback on any decisions taken

Involve- here staff and learners work closely together to make sure all views are understood and notice is taken

Collaborate – here aspects of decision making involve a partnership with learners

Empower –when learners control their own learning, set agendas for change and contribute to management decisions then a state of empowerment is said

to have been achieved adapted from LSIS/nus 2013: pg.7).

The Interest in Student Voice

Given the growing interest in learner voice both from a research perspective and in terms of the rhetoric emanating from policy documents (DBIS:2014) the Jisc research, described above, set out to answer the following questions.

What do learners want from their digital experience in the FE and Skills sector'

How are they currently experiencing the technologies for learning

And

What do they expect in the future?

Given the interest was in student perception the obvious data collecting tool for this project was student focus groups.

A Less Positive Picture Elsewhere

The inventiveness found during the main research has to be considered against other evidence in the project identifying the challenges faced by many intuitions. These include poor access, lack of confidence and training for tutors, limited staff and student commitment leading to pragmatic acceptance rather than an enthusiastic commitment to the opportunities provided by new technologies. The datedness of resources in some institutions and the difficulties associated with appointing staff with educational and technological expertise was also noted (www.digitalstudent.jisc/involve). In some institutions shortages in resources were severally limiting the expansion of technology enhanced learning initiatives and restricting the opportunity for greater involvement of learners in organisational change. This we evidence from data collected during the research focus groups operated with learners in a range of organisations. Here a common theme was frustration in the learning community when student's technological expertise was not considered in college policy decision making (www.digitalstudent.jisc/involve).

A Fortuitous Meeting

When, at a Jisc run regional workshop, designed to disseminate the research findings from 12 focus groups run with FE learners, the research team met 2 students and a lecturer who were reporting on innovative practice in one institution, the research took something of an unplanned direction and this article is the result. This practice provided evidence of innovations in technology whilst also demonstrating a highly developed approach to student voice and learner engagement. In one institution, the institution which is the focus of this research article, innovative practice was in evidence with students appointed to the role of 'Digi-Pals', trained by e-learning staff and given the role of supporting cross college digital practice. Here, we contend is evidence of learner voice operating at a level higher than those categorised by LSIS and the NUS (LSIS/nus: 2013), reaching beyond 'empowerment' to the level of full and active engagement. Given the enthusiasm from the lecturer and the two representative students, further exploration of the innovative practice in the institution here described was deemed necessary.

The Research Approach

The tenets of critical theory, as the research paradigm adopted here, align constructively with the qualitative research paradigm. In order to match epistemology with methodology (Koro-Ljungberg et.al: 2009) interviews became the selected research method for this section of the research project. In addition, a review was carried out of the college website to glean information on the technological resources available there to support learners. It was important to empower the respondents to find and speak in their own voice. Proponents of critical theory desire to generate insights, explain events, and seek to understand social issues. The epistemological foundation of critical theory suggest that the researcher might be a non-neutral participant (Creswell, 2005). The researchers here were exploring something of interest to them and with a research interest in sharing good practice here declare a personal bias and an individual intent for social change. With Guba

and Lincoln (2005):

“We are persuaded that objectivity is a chimera: a mythological creature that never existed, save in the imaginations of those who believe that knowing can be separated”

Our goal of critical theory was to come to a trustworthy understanding of an innovative phenomenon and establish an open dialogue between us and the research participants. We wanted to understand how those involved in the project made sense and gave meaning to their experiences using a narrative form.

Study Design

A synthesis of two theoretical lenses serve here as a tool for describing, analysing, and interpreting the views of the study participants. The first of is that of technology and its role in change, with the second theoretical focus on concepts of liberation and democracy applied to the use of student voice.

The technological lens identifies the close association in research writing between the empowerment of learners and movement to the greater use of technology in learning (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004; Kajder & Bull, 2004; Kaplan et.al. 2007).

Through the use of technology students can be more engaged in classroom participation and dialogue. The democratic classroom, where every learner has a voice becomes feasible when conversational technologies are employed to empower students whose voices may previously be unheard.

The use of assistive technologies offers new opportunities for those who are reluctant or have disabilities, to speak, discuss, and learn (Browne: 2008).

In terms of the relational aspects of technological change Prensky (2001) identified students as digital natives used to multi-tasking, using social media, and finding answers through digital means. Traditional learning spaces may seem archaic to digital natives. The modern teacher who is not proficient in the use of technology can be considered a digital immigrant with a perceived

inability or hesitancy to speak, teach, and learn, using technological tools. Researchers have highlighted the need to encourage teachers to become enthused and embrace technology identifying reluctance among some to embrace change (Hall: 2017).

Reflecting on the growing use of technology among the young, Prensky predicted a shift in classroom power relations: “Our students, who are empowered in so many ways outside their schools today, have no meaningful voice at all in their own education. In the 21st century, this lack of any voice on the part of the customer will soon be unacceptable” (Prensky, 2005:13). Almost in response to Prensky’s warning, the interest in student voice, as demonstrated in the design of the Jisc funded research project, follows a growing focus in both research and practice on learner perceptions and participant views.

The Lens of Liberation and Democracy using Student Voice

Research by Fielding (2008) identifies the benefits of eliciting learner voice, with their views taken more seriously, an increased sense of respect in turn makes them more inclined to reflect and discuss their learning. Listening and acting on the views of students can provide the tools to influence what, where and when they learn. The president of the National Union of Students in 2008 called for a diversity of approach and breadth in the way organisations engage with their learners, to enable learners to be ‘a driving force behind developments in our learning communities’ (LSIS/nus:2013 pg. 5). This brings to mind a student community liberated from the control of teacher determined knowledge and actively and democratically participating in the learning process.

However, Flutter and Ruddock (2004) argue that although learner voice has been on the agenda since the early 1990s, learners are seldom consulted and remain largely unheard in the change process in many educational institutions. Writing at the same time (Gregson et.al.2004) report that learner

voice can have a direct impact on changing the ways students learn and therefore can have a major influence on their education. Rudd (2007) argues that education should be reshaped around the needs of the learner, rather than the learner conforming to the system. However, this requires significant changes in the culture of education and the relationships between institutions, teachers, and learners (Rudd, 2007; Leadbeater, 2004). Failure to engage with learners in the education process risks increasing disengagement and disillusion in their educational experiences. When students have a voice and an influence on decisions and outcomes they are more likely to participate and to learn through participation (Rudd et al, 2007; Smyth, 2007; Mitra, 2008).

One of the most prominent advocates in the past century of student voice and empowerment is Paulo Freire. Freire (1970) rejected the commonplace practice of what he called the banking concept of education where teachers impart knowledge to receiving participants placing learners in a powerless and oppressed position. Freire advocates that instead of being oppressed by teacher domination and a lifeless curriculum, students should be given a voice to participate in real and meaningful ways. The awakening of each individual voice in the classroom then leads to liberation, empowerment, and change (1970:14).

Instead of becoming complicit to student oppression by utilizing traditional-yet misguided teaching practices, Freire suggested that teachers need to employ practical strategies that would elicit collective inquiry, creativity and a closer connection with reality in the classroom. Freire argues that “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (1970: 72).

As suggested, such an approach might be identified as belonging to the critical education paradigm. Here theorists such as Habermas, although not mentioning student voice specifically, argue for a focus on freedom, justice and rationality

in the organisation of education experience (Habermas :1974). Giroux explores this further to extol audience power and active involvement as key elements in the relationship between teachers, students, institutions and society in both the classroom and communities external to the school (Giroux 1994:30). For Freire the classroom should be a place where meaningful dialogue takes place, where instructors and learners explore together and discover new knowledge (1972).

Freire suggested that teachers need to employ practical strategies to elicit collective inquiry, creativity and a closer connection with reality in the classroom. With others (Dewey, 1916; Vygotsky, 1978), Freire (1970) suggests that learning needs to be a dialogical process which engages students and empowers them in social ways: “Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (Freire,1970:73). Freire’s educative framework shifts emphasis and power from the teacher to the student. With this shift, teacher and student alike have voice and opportunity to learn collaboratively.

Freire believed that by inviting and encouraging each individual student to participate and be involved in classroom discussions a productive climate of learning would evolve. In explaining the role of educators in this process, Freire (2000) suggested that “the educator with a democratic vision or posture cannot avoid in his praxis insisting on the critical capacity, curiosity, and autonomy of the learner” (Freire:1970:13). To truly liberate and empower the student, teachers need to glean the thoughts, opinions, and ideas of their students: “Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students of the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students- teachers” (Freire, 1970: 80). In essence, a new and productive learning environment is created where teachers and students are both learners together. As a result, the traditional ‘walls of oppression’ (Freire,1970: 80) fall away as the teacher joins with the student in inquiry and discussion.

Why Critical Theory?

The technology lens and student voice lens have been described here in focus with the critical theory model of education. The purpose of critical theory is to be practical and to have impact on social justice, providing for a more egalitarian society and supporting the emancipation of individuals in it. For Anderson (1989) the overriding goal of critical research is to “free individuals from sources of domination and repression” (p. 249). Known as the transformative paradigm (Mertens:2007) and considered to be highly influential in supporting moves towards a more just and egalitarian society (Cohen et.al:2011), student voice and technological change have become mainstream in the practice of many educational institutions representing a close connection between democracy, education and an egalitarian moral view of life (Flanders 2017). Proponents of student voice advocate adoption of the norms of democratic practice and foster involvement, reason, and knowledge over rank, tolerance, and community. Students are perceived as capable and competent with a view that is relevant. They are expected to be involved in decisions about their education.

Case Study

Case study was the obvious methodological choice when trying to present a true and meaningful picture of the innovative practice underway in the college. Given the lack of research on student voice in the sector (Pavlaou and Sharp :2014) and that ‘Further Education is one of our best kept secrets in the education system’ (Ainley and Bailey:1997 :12) any opportunity to celebrate good practice should be exploited (Browne: 2009 :115).

The research took place in a General Further Education College located in the North of England. The college is situated at the heart of a multiracial community and aims to provide social cohesion in an area of high deprivation. The majority of students are from the most economically deprived local areas, around a third are of minority ethnic heritage and almost two thirds of students

enrol at the college without having achieved five GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics. The college is situated in government priority area as 14% of the local population have no qualifications (www.ofsted.bradfordcollegereport.2011) .

As stated the research was based in one College. Case study is a powerful tool, is strong in reality, can support the democratisation of decision-making and is ideally suited for championing future change and celebrating innovation (Browne:2009). This Case was selected when ground breaking practice was discovered by happenstance and the author was motivated to be make this public and share with the practitioner community. This noteworthy practice involved not just listening to learners but appointment them as change agents in the institution, acknowledging their technological expertise, giving them a role to support institutional change and placing them in a position of authority.

The methods used to gather information included an interview with the E Learning Manager at the study institution. We carried out a review of the college website which contained many interesting video clips. We reviewed the online discussions posted there by the Digi-pals. In addition, one non-IT specialist staff member was also interviewed. This participant was selected by the E-Learning Manager on the basis of her knowledge of the academic staff who had most benefited from working with the Digi-pals. All the appointed Digi-pals in post at the time of the research were interviewed. The interview data was analysed using a themed approach to support an assessment of the impact of the Digi-Pal role on the Digi-Pals themselves, as well as on the one representative staff team member. The themes adopted focused on technical skill acquisition, perceived improvements in soft skills and anticipated career advantage. The research questions were designed to answer the following questions:

- 1) What have been the institutional benefits of introducing the Digi-pal role?
- 2) What impact has appointment to the position had on those selected

3) In what ways have the Digi-pals influenced practice in the Case Study institution?

Research Finding

Data from the interview with the Head of E-Learning identified the first innovative approach applied in the Case Study institution. This related to structural organisation with the Head of E-learning appointed to a merged department bringing together technology specialist, learning technologists, teachers and students. The merging of academic and technical staff as an action of deliberative excellence (Tettegah et.al: 2006) was seen as the tool which created a culture shift with the embedding of high quality technological expertise into everyday teaching practice (interview data). Prior to this structural re-organisation the college had relied on appointing subject-based e-learning champions as promoted by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (www.LSISE-cpd). The next innovative step was to abolish the e learning champion role and reallocate 5 e-learning champions to a cross institutional Digi-Pal position to work with the 5 appointed student Digi-Pals.

The selection of the appointed student Digi-Pals mirrored that of an employment exercise with an internal advert posted around the college and on the institutional intranet, an application required in writing by a set date, formal interviews and letter of appointment to the selected appointees. This process resulted in 8 applicants with 5 appointments made. The three students who were not appointed were offered advice and guidance on how to improve their application should more appointments be made at a later stage.

The successfully appointed student Digi-Pals were given identifying 'hoodies' to wear, allocated funds of £1,100 each for carrying out their new role and each given an ipad. Quasi employment as 'Digi-pals' involved the students in signing a contract with the expectation of regular attendance at staff meetings. The Digi team met regularly- three missed meetings resulted in a loss of role.

The Digi-Pals became actively involved in enriching the digital activities of the institution by, for example, producing safety videos, creating an 'App of the Month' communication and engaging in learning walks around the college offering support to learners and staff. The students became part of the college e-learning department and were consulted on all matters digital (interview data). The research revealed that the Digi-Pals felt their role to be significant, their voice to be heard and their contribution valued. The Digi-Pals talked about their active contribution to decision making in departmental meetings and described their role as empowering, as a partnership with staff that was truly collaborative. This mirrors the views of Fletcher (2017) which argues that a new view of students must be adopted where their capabilities and skills are harnessed to drive educational change. The democratic process of involving students in the learning process mirrors the principles of equity and humanity.

The involvement of the Digi-Pals extended beyond attendance at meetings. They had more than a voice, as described in other educational institutions (Hall 2017), receiving additional training in software packages so that they became ipso facto additional technological support in the organisation. Trained in the use of assistive software the Digi-Pals supported other students and staff in the use of learning enhancing technologies. These included a 'Jaws' package for the visual impaired, screen magnifying equipment, Dragon Naturally speaking software which changes speech into text, Braille software, Claro software which will read scanned elements of text in speech form and Omni-page which can translate and reformulate documents. To promote their work the Digi-Pals engaged in film making and editing, and supported staff and students in the use of presentational tools such as Prezzi (for more information on these resources and a report on the developing use of technology in the FE sector (see www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/2017)).

Using funding from a 'Learning Futures' initiative the team of Digi-Pals

designing a CPD (Continuous Professional Development) programme on the use of technology for learning. In designing the programme 'the Digi-Pals will foster collaboration internally and externally and bridge the gap between teachers, learners and technical teams' (www.learningfutures - accessed 27.01.2015). The course involves the trialling of new Apps, and access to a Digital Literacy Skills Scan module to promote participant reflection on technological skill. Here we find evidence of the Digi-Pals being actively engaged in the creating new resources for learning and become active agents in promoting the digital agenda in the college.

Further imbedding of practice can be evidenced by reading the Moodle site for the College where modules of learning for the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) are available. A module entitled 'ICT and e-learning' forms part of the Masters Programme in Teacher Education and provides an introduction to Web 2.0 technologies with participants required to 'provide blended learning solutions in a climate in which physical learning spaces are shrinking and virtual learning spaces are becoming mainstream within educational settings' www.moodle/search (Password protected and accessed 27.01.2017) . The assessment task for this module is innovative and courageous representing another element of ingenuity worthy of mention. Trainee Teachers, many of whom work in the college and complete the M level module as part of their PGCE qualification delivered at the College, are required to design an online Web CT course as part of their assessment. This practice ensures the development of a growing resource of online teaching materials increasing in volume on an annual basis. And, here, the Digi-Pals work with those new to teaching and offer them support and guidance to ensure they can complete this task. The potential benefit of this collaborative arrangement is the opportunity it provides those new to teaching to establish collaborative relationships with their learners and realise the benefits when teachers have the confidence to acknowledge that in the case of technology, the learner is more likely to be operating at a higher level of expertise than the

lecturer (Robertson:2015).

The Digi-pal role has been in place now for several years and is embedded into the cultural practice of the institution. The student Digi-Pals have produced a video entitled ' Rise of the Digi-Pals' as a take on 'Rise of the Planet of the Apes'. It celebrates what is being achieved and demonstrates the key role played by the students in driving forward the institutions use of technology. It is evidence of active engagement in the life of the institution, a step beyond the category of empowerment as identified by LSIS/nus (2013), to be given responsibility for the development of learning resources, in being acknowledged for their expertise and respected as useful members of the college community. The students in this research study are active participants in the change underway in their institution, working alongside staff to facilitate a greater use of technology in the learning process.

The Data from the Students

To analyse the research data gleaned from interviews carried out with the student Digi-pals a range of themes were identified and linked to the LSIS/nus 2013 categories of learner engagement (LSIS/nus:2013). The first of these is Improved learner motivation and confidence. Here learners reported on the benefits of working across the institution and in meeting more staff and students:

'As a Digi-Pal I get to work across the college in all the departments. It has given me great insight into the whole institution and allowed me to talk to so many people'

'Staff ask me for help when they are preparing their sessions. Previously I was considered a bit of a geek and I didn't have many friends but now that the staff need me, the other students treat me with respect and acknowledge that I know stuff that they need to know '.

The pride felt in the role is obvious here with students feeling much more part

of the organisation with improved social standing and credibility for the Digi Pal with knowledge and skills is an unforeseen benefit of engaging learners in the learning community. Here we see evidence of the development of an egalitarian educational environment as advocated by critical theorists such as Giroux (1994) and Freire (1972).

Increased Technical Skills

The Digi-Pals were able to cascade their skills as learnt in their role. Having received special technical training they were aware of the importance of sharing their skills and benefits this gave not only to them but to others.

The interview data revealed that the Digi-Pals appreciate the benefits they were accruing in being taught new skills to cascade throughout the organisation. The comment below refers to a presentation tool being used by those with the 'know how' as a more engaging and fluid approach to delivering power-point presentations.

'The e-learning team taught me how to use Prezi and I have shown many other groups of students and staff how to use this amazing tool. They are all using it now to improve their course presentations.

Career Enhancements

The research revealed that that the students were aware of the unintended personal benefits of enriching their skills and enhancing their confidence for future employment. The student reflections here are particularly poignant given the low levels of qualification in the local population (Ofsted report:2017 accessed 12.1.2018)

'As a result of being a Digi-Pal I want to become a software developer or an IT engineer'

'I have learnt so much about filming and editing, I can really see a clear future with possibilities for employment based on the skills I have developed'

'I can create video animations and have learnt new editing skills. I can help students answer techy questions'.

Improved capabilities in the softer skills

Some students mentioned improvements in their social skills with greater confidence resulting from the need to communicate effectively with teachers

and students alike:

'I have improved my skills of working with others, my communications skills and become much more socially adept in all my interactions'

'My communication skills and confidence have improved considerably

Evidence of Improved Motivation

The Digi-Pals acknowledged the pride they felt in being appointed to their role and the newly created enthusiasm it created for being part of the institution.

There was also evidence that the process might encourage learners to join the staff of the college at some point in their careers.

'I really like being a Digi-Pal. Not one of us has missed a meeting and we work together as a team to help one another even though we are studying different subjects'.

'I can't wait to get into college now to see what I can do next. I really love being a student here. I would love to get a job here when I finish my course'

Working in Partnership with Academic Staff

The Digi-Pals don't just help other students, they are involved in working with and supporting staff as well. Here again, we see evidence of a developing respect for skills and abilities in a relationship of equality and mutual support as advocated by the critical education theorists (Giroux: 1994).

The student Digi-Pal showed me how to use 'One Note' and now all my team use it to plan schemes of work, to share our lesson plans, to record feedback from parents following parent's evenings. One Note is supporting us to work collaboratively as a team.

And

'The Digi-Pals are like an extra pair of hands for us and I have built up a really strong relationship with two of them who help me data storage for departmental record keeping and have offered advice on the preparation of my teaching resources'.

‘A number of staff in my department say that their practice has moved on so much since the Digi-Pals have been in place’.

It is apparent from the research data that the Digi-Pal process is allowing learners and staff in the Case Study institution to model highly developed practices in the area of student voice to the benefit of the learner and the organisation. We found evidence of a new category of learner engagement that goes beyond that of empowerment to include active engagement in the learning life of the institution. This we maintain on the basis that the Case Study organisation is using learners in highly developed ways to co-create learning materials, to produce a module, to offer peer support to fellow students and staff whilst also contributing to decisions about technology in the college.

Conclusions

A Jisc research project which privileged learner voice as part of an ambition to discover what FE learners want from their digital experiences resulted in the happenstance discovery of innovative practice in one college. This article has focused on that Case Study institution and discovered learner engagement at a high level.

The research adopted two theoretical lenses to explore the role of technology in the empowerment of learners and the use of student voice in creating an egalitarian, liberated and motivating learner environment. The use of critical theory and its associated qualitative research methodologies led to the identification of students actively involved in designing their learning experience and being very much involved in the institution in the support they were offering to staff and students.

Identification of the definitions and categorisations for learner engagement, as proposed by LSIS and the nus (LSIS/nus:2013), has allowed for the exploration of institutional practice at a highly developed level. As a result of this exploration the authors feel confident in identifying a new level of engagement which goes beyond the category of ‘empowerment’ as defined by LSIS to one of ‘active engagement’. Here learners participate in the design of learning resources, they produce materials for teaching, they support staff and fellow learners alike, and play a key role in the decision-making

processes around technology. The practice recorded here is not just allowing student participants to have voice, it is inviting them to be change agents as collaborators and co-producers in their institution. Good practice such as this must be disseminated and shared. This article goes some way in celebrating good practice and in its publication, supports the need for more research in the FE sector.

Evidence is presented here of a brave approach which involves learners fully in the development of digital technologies. The testimony of the learners stands as a record of the power of going further than just listening to their voice with benefits recorded in learner confidence, ambition, motivation and technical skill.

Innovations in student involvement such as these must become standard practice if the sector is to embrace and benefit from the enhancing power of new technology and we must celebrate practice which no longer just gives voice to learners in a tokenistic way (Hall:2017) but fosters a collaborative learning community which allows learners to thrive whilst supporting others to thrive also. The research, although small, has shown that when students are truly involved in the learning process learning becomes meaningful, purposeful and relevant for the world these learners will inhabit.

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