

Survey Question

18. This teacher encourages me to share my ideas or opinions about what we are learning in the class

Australian Professional Standard

Professional Practice Domain

Standard 4: Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments

Focus areas:

- 4.1 Support student participation
- 4.2 Manage classroom activities
- 3.3 Use teaching strategies
- 3.5 Use effective classroom communication

What does this sound like in the classroom?

"I like the way my teacher gets us all to speak in class, and doesn't just dismiss our comments. She listens to what we have to say, and then she actually lets us decide what we'd like to learn more about."

Why is this important?

Recent research studies have emphasised the importance of student voice in building engagement in and with schools (the UK ESRC Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning Project 2003). Significant in this research has been the finding that, when students are given a voice, they become more engaged with learning. Moreover, teachers gain insight into how to support student engagement and build more positive and collaborative relationships with students.

'Student voice' is about valuing people and the learning that results from engaging student capacities and voices within schools. It involves students being meaningfully involved in their own learning and ensuring student goals and issues are addressed, with the ultimate aim of improving the engagement and learning of students (Victorian DET, 2007). There is a major need for teachers to balance talking to and listening to students, including "listening to their questions, their ideas, their struggles, their strategies of learning, their successes, their interaction with peers, their outputs, and their views on teaching" (Hattie, 2013, p. 186).

These recommendations are by no means 'ground-breaking'. Bruner (1966) discussed how participation is strongly linked with the constructivist theory of learning which emphasises the importance of students actively determining what they learn and having a role in the direction of their learning. The Victorian Ministry of Education (1984) published a series of policy papers that demonstrated changing views and attitudes towards young people, such as the recommendation that schools should 'ensure that students are clear about what they are expected to accomplish and provide them with increasing opportunities to help determine the educational tasks and goals

that are set for them'. Further, schools were encouraged to actively involve students in their learning by having students participating in setting learning goals and reflecting on the effectiveness of their learning.

Some students may participate readily in class offering personal opinions or life experiences to address a topic, but the challenge for an instructor is to move students beyond offering personal opinions. Research is a valuable skill. Quoting scholars is a step above proffering personal beliefs and perceptions, yet regurgitating the thoughts of others does not equate to critical thinking. Our goal, as educators, should be to create a learning environment that invites students to engage in critical reflection and evaluation of evidence. Opinions are all well and good, but the challenge is to prompt students to provide justifications and explanations of their views. Critical thinking is defined as a reflective and reasonable thought process embodying depth, accuracy, and astute judgment to determine the merit of a decision, an object, or a theory (Alwehaibi, 2012).

What strategies have been shown to work in the classroom?

Strategies that succeed in the classroom will generally involve consultative processes whereby the students and teacher work together to create an inclusive 'sharing' framework. Students are more engaged when their opinions are listened to, and used to transform pedagogical practices.

Fielding (2001) found that students will tend to adjust their behaviour depending on the context, and that the most disengaged students are least likely to raise their voices. For this reason alone it is important that strategies are employed in the classroom that provide opportunities for student voice, and the space for teachers to show that they care about student opinions. A meaningful discussion requires an environment where students are provided with:

- timely, positive and constructive feedback
- some expression of agreement, encouragement and appreciation
- challenging questions that encourage deep thinking
- the value of comparing and contrasting; everything is not right or wrong
- open praise of high quality work so that other students can see what excellent work resembles
- opportunities to provide problem-solving responses as opposed to offering textbook definitions

What three things can I try in my classroom tomorrow?

1. Popsicle sticks. Each individual has their name written onto a popsicle stick, and as a teacher poses a question to the class, they draw a popsicle stick from the container. This allows each student to 'have a turn' and is a democratic approach to including all students.
2. Discussion tickets. Hand out one or two "tickets" to each student before a discussion starts. Once the discussion is underway, then every student who wishes to speak must first "pay" for the privilege by giving up a ticket. This exercise is useful for drawing out the

comments of the more reticent students — and those who tend to speak most often begin to understand their pattern of conversation dominance.

3. Create a conversational space. Sometimes simply changing the configuration of seats can radically alter the flow of discussion in a class. If there is moveable furniture in a classroom, try shifting it around. Pay attention to the shape of arrangements, spacing (very important!), and the teacher's position within configurations.

What opportunities are there for collaboration with my colleagues?

Take the opportunity to discuss this at your next department or year-level meeting. How are teachers currently providing forums for student voice? Do students have opportunities to voice their questions, concerns and congratulations in regards to academic and pastoral curriculum?

Where can I find out more?

Video:

- Teaching Channel: Laser pointer
- Teaching Channel: Roll the dice
- Teaching Channel: Engaging and motivating - student participation
- Teaching Channel: The Wingman

Referenced articles, books and other great reads:

- Alwehaibi, H. (2012). Novel program to promote critical thinking among higher education students: Empirical study from Saudi Arabia. *Asian Social Science*, 8(11), 193-204.
- Bruner, J. (1966) *Toward a Theory of Instruction*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- UK ESRC Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning Project (2000-2003) Briefing Paper. Accessed 14 June 2015.
- Hattie, J. (2013) *Visible Learning for Teachers*. Routledge Taylor & Francis.
- Fielding, M. (2001) *Beyond the Rhetoric of Student Voice: New Departures or New Constraints in the Transformation of 21st Century Schooling*.
- Fielding, M. & Rudduck, J. (2003) *The transformation potential of student voice: Confronting the power issues*, Conference paper presented at the Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association.
- Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET), (2007) *Student Voice: A historical perspective and new directions*. Accessed 12 May 2015.
- Mitra, D. (2004) *The Significance of Students: Can Increasing 'Student Voice' in Schools Lead to Gains in Youth Development*, *Teachers College Record*, Volume 106, Number 4.
- Blount, M. & Napolitano, R. (2014) *Leading Classroom Discussion*. Iowa State University: Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching. March 20 2014. Accessed 3 June 2015.