

More effectively harnessing student voices in higher education (especially in pandemic times)

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Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharper relief one of the key contemporary challenges of higher education: how to most effectively engage students. The move to online teaching has increased the potential distance between teachers and students, amplifying the challenges of designing conditions for meaningful learning (Marinoni, Land, & Jensen, 2020; Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2020). This development has also forced more questions about how academic teachers can most

effectively capture and harness student perspectives on their learning experiences to enhance current and prospective approaches to learning design.

Recently research undertaken across Chilean universities (Darwin, 2020a) suggests that most institutions place largely instrumental value on the student voice, with most universities relying primarily on end-of-semester, student ratings-based surveys as a means of quantifying student responses to their learning experiences. Moreover, existing (and anticipated) systems of institutional and program-level accreditation overseen by the *Comisión Nacional de Acreditación* (CNA) place little emphasis on the need for universities to better understand or more effectively evaluate student learning experiences. So, how has this unique reliance on student surveys evolved in higher education—including Chilean institutions—and why have these been adopted as a legitimate proxy for understanding teaching quality? Moreover, what alternatives have emerged as a potential more substantial and effective means of understanding student perspectives on their learning experiences?

Student ratings in higher education

Student ratings-based surveys—measuring such things as the student experience or levels of engagement or satisfaction with teaching—are now a familiar feature of higher education globally (Hammonds, Mariano, Ammons, & Chambers, 2017; Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015; Uttl, White, & Gonzalez, 2017). Although serious limitations have been identified in such surveys—particularly related to gender and ethnicity biases, the effect of course design and response rates (Stark & Freishtat, 2014; Stark, Ottoboni, & Boring, 2016)—these end-of-semester surveys have become the predominant means of evaluating teacher and teaching quality in higher education. Moreover, survey outcomes are increasingly being used as a proxy measure in functions as diverse as internal and regional university rankings, academic performance assessment and in institutional marketing (Darwin, 2020b).

This reliance on a range of standard student ratings-based surveys—though not uncommon across university systems—is increasingly problematic given learning environments are increasingly dynamic, diversified and technologically rich in form (Altbach, 2016; Tight, 2019). Most of the current student ratings metrics are derived from a generation of quality assurance demands that confronted universities under the pervasive ideologies of *New Public Management*, which sought to make publicly funded institutions perform as if they were private enterprise organisations (Marginson, 2014). Although the model of Chilean higher education is fundamentally different—being shaped by dictatorship-era, neo-liberalist orthodoxies that forced private funding of study—the global influence of student surveys as a legitimate form of quality assurance is evident in local institutional practices. Additionally, as is the case globally, in Chile the current pandemic has amplified the inherent limitations of retrospective and metric-centred surveys, with teachers struggling to understand the profound challenges of learning design and student engagement in the relative anonymity of the online environment.

Limitations of student surveys

Despite their inferred objectivity and validity, student ratings-based surveys are not epistemically benign. Normally framed by a deficit conception of idealised teacher and teaching performance, student ratings seek to simplify the complex realities of teaching activity. Moreover, surveys seek to condense diverse student perspectives into a singular, homogenised form that encourages historical and cross-program comparison based on simple metrics. This singular student voice is understood as providing definitive insights into the experience, engagement or satisfaction of students. Although a range of survey designs

have developed depending on the sociocultural foundations of higher education systems, a broadly common feature has been the privileging of summative data drawn from ratings-based surveys. Aside from generating significant levels of academic anxiety and often hostile responses to student opinion (Hornstein, 2017; Schuck, Gordon, & Buchanan, 2008), the inherently reductive nature of student ratings has also fundamentally redefined the learning relationship between teaching academic and students.

Even before the pandemic, serious questions emerged as to the capability of student ratings-based surveys to meaningfully contribute to improving the quality of teaching (Feistauer & Richter, 2017; Uttl et al., 2017). The comparative logic behind the quantitative design of student surveys—though ensuring validity and reliability—equally has imposed a rigidity of design that is potentially unresponsive to diverse or transforming teaching environments (Okupe & Medland, 2019). This limitation is of even greater significance in the current period of online and more flexible forms of pedagogy, where now traditional survey questions can be rendered increasingly irrelevant by the circumstances forced by teaching in a time of the pandemic.

This inherent inflexibility—combined with the rising mistrust of student ratings as they are normalised as a means of assessing, comparing and judging academic and institutional performance—means that student opinion is less likely than ever to shape pedagogical decision-making. Rather than inspire reflection and redesign of learning, at this moment this form of metric-based assessment seems to be more remote than ever in giving life to student voices in a time where this is a critical necessity for improving teaching.

Power of student voices

Unlike in other areas of education, higher education has been comparatively slow to recognise the value of student voices in assisting to inform both the design and effectiveness of teaching pedagogies (Canning, 2017; Seale, 2010). Paradoxically, the introduction of broadscale student surveys resulted from student demands four decades ago (largely in Anglophone higher education systems) for greater institutional democracy and for improved quality and accountability in university teaching. Initial teacher responses to student surveys were largely hostile, primarily because this disturbed the balance of power relations that had historically prevailed in elite university structures (Centra, 1993). Nevertheless, over subsequent decades as surveys became progressively normalised, greater efforts were made to use the data they generated to improve teaching using student insights. In this phase, surveys tended to be held between teachers and students, leading to the design of more qualitative surveys to provide more analytical depth, the introduction of program-level student representation and a greater focus on teacher professional development. However, as the quality assurance and neoliberalist drives swept across global university systems, student surveys were rapidly repurposed and broadened in use to become essentially tools of measurement and pseudo-market discrimination (Sabri, 2013; Schuck et al., 2008). A critical change in this phase was to move the locus of control for student surveys from academic teachers to the institution, transforming their purpose from improvement to comparison.

Yet, despite this narrowed repurposing, student voices can still offer academic teachers potentially valuable insights into the complex and diverse effects of program design and classroom pedagogies on student learning. When student opinions are understood as responses to—rather than as a measure of—teacher quality, they can form an important catalyst for professional reflection and pedagogical improvement. However, this means developing evaluative strategies that move beyond reductive metrics

to a broader and more qualitative understanding of the range of student responses to the learning conditions they encounter.

Average ‘scores’ generated by student surveys offer little in the way of clarity, diversity or insight into why students rated as they did (and even less so if response rates are low). Conversely, more open forms of investigation to develop a more complex understanding of student perspectives has the potential to provide data that provides provocative insights into differing levels of student engagement in learning activities.

In the current challenging circumstances with the pandemic of a rapid move to online teaching, it is timely to consider alternative, more expansive forms of harnessing student voices as a means of better understanding the effectiveness of learning designs and pedagogies-in-use. Although student surveys are unlikely to be going anywhere in the foreseeable future, the demands of the contemporary classroom—and particularly the online classroom—necessitate more complex approaches to understanding student voices.

Alternative strategies for capturing student voices

Educational value has been identified in harnessing *student voices* in higher education, given these insights can provide a potent catalyst to reflect on and improve pedagogy (Seale, 2010).

However, the escalating significance of student ratings in universities globally—including most recently as a core contributor to some global university rankings models—has effectively crowded out dialogue and research on alternative approaches. In addition, the fragility of student surveys (such as response rates, bias and weak links to learning), means that often teaching academics do not respect their outcomes, particularly where institutions reify their findings (Blackmore, 2009; Darwin, 2017; Edström, 2008). Therefore, the work of student ratings primarily resonates with quality assurance discourse—that is, to ensure the reliability of what is offered based on a condensed student voice—rather than the imperative of improving teaching and learning outcomes.

So, if there is pedagogical value in harnessing student voices, what viable alternatives are there to conventional student rating models (and how realistic are they to enact in practice)? In *Figure 1*, a range of alternative options to engaging student voices are summarised. This quadrant diagram demonstrates the relationship of these potential alternatives to traditional, end-of-semester survey approaches, framed by levels of collaboration and research-focused approaches.

	<i>Qualitative evaluation</i>	<i>Student Collaboration</i>
<i>Collaborative</i>	Formative qualitative evaluation	Collaborative Inquiry
	Summative qualitative evaluation	Student-as-partners (curriculum/pedagogy)
	<i>Traditional surveys</i>	<i>Classroom-based research</i>
	Student experience or engagement surveys	Empirical research
<i>Generic</i>	Student satisfaction surveys	Action Research
	<i>Quality Assurance</i>	<i>Program Improvement</i>

Figure 1: Student voice: traditional and alternative approaches

Qualitative student evaluation

As noted earlier, before student evaluation was called into the service of institutional quality assurance, its primary focus was on providing data directly to teaching academics on their classrooms. Although evaluation systems initially centred on quantitative ratings, over time demand grew for more sophisticated methods of understanding student opinions. Central to this drive was the development of more open forms of questions that encourage students not only to rate but also to provide comments that provided greater insights into the rationale for differing student responses. This allowed teachers to understand the reasons for student responses (and be able to respond appropriately), not just to receive metrics without clear explanation (and speculate as to the reasons).

As the complexity of learning environments and student cohorts has grown in recent decades, so has the drive for more complex forms of capturing the student voice. One strategy has been a return to this earlier model of evaluation, which emphasise qualitative forms of data collection. Several recent studies (e.g. Darwin, 2016; Steyn, Davies, & Sambo, 2019) have highlighted the value of using more qualitative forms of data collection to understand student learning, either as a means of formative or summative evaluation of student opinion. A critical advantage of these approaches is that they foreground a more complex and heterogeneous form of student voice, one that provides a more empirically grounded and potentially more potent catalyst for the reconsideration of approaches to curriculum and learning design. This form of data can provide a firmer ground for more productive critical reflection and for a more developed understanding of why different students respond in differing forms to similar learning conditions.

Importantly, this more expansive form of evaluation also encourages more thinking outside the immediate classroom toward collective issues across subjects and programs. This is because more

complex responses often point to less obvious features of learning, such as entry-level expectations of students, relationship to other subjects or broader levels of student support (that all go beyond the direct subject level). However, what this qualitative form of evaluation does not offer is the utility of conclusive measurement offered by more conventional ratings-based approaches.

Student collaboration

Engaging students in more direct forms—such as collaborators or partners—in the learning process is an increasingly recognised method that has developed in response to more directly understand and respond in practice to student voices. Specifically, this approach has sought to confront student passivity and inertia by making students direct participants in pedagogical design and practices in programs (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011). The essence of more direct forms of collaboration is to redefine student voices from an abstract form into a concrete role in shaping and influencing the learning in which they are engaged.

This collaboration-centred approach also challenges the conventional approaches to retrospective evaluation, which stresses teacher-driven questions and student-focussed responses. Instead, it foregrounds the value of reciprocity and shared responsibility in pedagogic decision-making. Similarly, engaging students directly as collaborators transcends qualitative forms of evaluation in removing the enforced distance placed between teachers and students, encouraging student voices to mutually strengthen levels of student engagement and rigour in academic thinking around issues of design and practice. A range of recent studies (e.g. Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2016) have demonstrated the potential effectiveness of these forms of more collaborative engagement in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes.

Although it is understood that this collaborative approach may not be suitable in all curricula or teaching contexts, its value is seen in developing a more common language and shared dialogue with students. Inevitably this dialogue produces tensions, however, the objective is for the differing demands of teachers and students to be negotiated rather than have these disregarded (and produce disengagement or alienation). This more democratic relationship is seen as having the potential to encourage productive pedagogical exchange and heighten levels of student engagement through the design of more co-authored learning experiences. Clearly, the affordances of the online environment offer considerable potential to generate more active learning communities with students, providing greater opportunities to build a stronger ongoing collaborative dialogue with students.

Classroom-based research

Scholarly research on the higher education classroom is undoubtedly a familiar reality to most teaching academics. However, its primary form tends to be chiefly as an abstraction of practice, rather than designed to directly harness student voices toward improving the quality of local learning. At a broader level, this was the catalyst for the development of classroom-based action research, which sought to bring the locus of research control back to teachers by encouraging the investigation and improvement of local practices (Kemmis, 2009, 2010). A characteristic dimension of action research approaches is to engage students directly as participants in the research (as opposed to subjects or respondents), thereby elevating their voices in both the design and development of research focussed on their learning.

Action research positions the teacher as an 'insider', privileging their understanding of the classroom culture and in developing the optimum means to understand student voices in the processes of learning improvement. Moreover, it understands the teacher and students as being best positioned to formulate how to most effectively and sustainably enhance learning. In common with other collaborative evaluative models, action research stresses the value of shared understandings of learning environments, as this can generate an informed dialogue among teachers and students, asserting this can most productively shape prospective practices.

Similarly, broader research approaches focussed on the classroom also offer the potentiality for more sophisticated levels of engagement with student voices. The rigorous expectations of research design demand the systematic collection of data from (and potentially with) students, making visible the complex contours of their experiences, engagement or perspectives in learning. This differs from the more informal practices of student collaboration, in that this more structured approach is adopted to seeking student insights toward a research-orientated outcome for improvement in classroom learning. However, the risk of classroom-based research rests in its potential abstract form (that is, being 'about' students, rather than with them). This reality may mean student voices are less material in influencing practices. In this respect, action research (and its ongoing cycles of change and collective reflection) offers greater evaluative potential than these broader classroom-based research forms (Norton, 2009).

Conclusions

The significant challenges confronting higher education teaching in the current pandemic crisis are raising new questions as to how to understand the effectiveness of online pedagogies and student engagement. However, even before the emergence of the pandemic, there were real questions as to how effectively student voices were being heard and responded to in Chilean universities. In common with most systems across the globe, most institutions have tended to instinctively rely on end-of-semester, ratings-based surveys to articulate student perspectives. However, this model—drawn primarily from the quality assurance movement that swept across university systems over many decades—effectively condenses student voices into a singular, measurable form that provides little real insight into diverse learner responses or potential responses. Research also continues to raise significant doubts about the ability of rating systems to withstand respondent bias and provide useful clarity for teaching academics seeking insights into student perspectives. There is also mounting evidence of the tenuous relationship between ratings and student learning outcomes, even before structural issues—such as poor response rates or cultural appropriateness of survey questions—are considered. Further, the increasing normalisation of these ratings as a comparative measure of teacher effectiveness has also meant that teachers are increasingly tending to develop either a hostile, ambivalent or despairing response to their arrival at the end of each semester. This further undermines their usefulness as a mechanism for improving teaching quality or learning outcomes.

The current pandemic crisis provides a useful opening to reconsider how the learning relationship between students and teachers is understood. As the abstract and often ambiguous nature of student ratings has historically struggled to provide insights beyond those demanded by quality assurance systems, the time is right to elevate student voices in new and more expansive forms as a more effective

means of harnessing and integrating student perspectives to improve the quality of online pedagogies. Put simply, by understanding student experiences in a more complex form, the prospects for more effective pedagogical improvement is greater. Instead of student voices being an end-of-semester torment, they can have a much richer potential to provide useful provocations to teaching practices—particularly those formed through pedagogical habit, rather than engagement with actual student experiences. And there is no better time for the adoption of more new approaches to harnessing student voices than when student learning occurs at a greater distance than has ever been the case.

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