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## Listening to Student Voice

Ineke Edes

### Abstract

Student voice is not just a privilege for students, but a must for proper and sustainable education, a form of learning that does not stop after the educational program has ended. Giving students voice creates a justice, fairness, from one human being to another, the teacher is equal to a student. He or she needs to accept and respect his or her students as equal, but also needs to acknowledge their differences. After ten years as a teacher at a University of Applied Sciences I write about my experiences of providing students with opportunities to make choices in what, when, and how to learn, and discuss how we deal with the felt insecurity, criticality and independency...and what it brings students and teachers. I can say no more teaching without giving students voice.

### Learning from personal experiences

Fifteen years old and very nervous I sat in the hallway of my high school waiting for my German teacher. He was late for my oral exams, I was worried that I made a mistake and came the wrong time or day. Twenty minutes late, he arrived as if I was too early and not that he was late. Without excuses he went in the classroom and told me he was ready in a minute and would call me, after another

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five minutes he invited me in. The first thing I asked was if I was mistaken about the time. He just said no. I felt annoyed and told him that I had been waiting and that I found it not appropriate for him not to apologize for his late arrival. I told him I was very nervous and his lateness got me even more nervous. Without responding to my remark, he started the exam by asking me in German about the books I had read. The exam went well and I immediately got my grade after the exam. But this teacher added something else in giving me my grade. He said that I was very lucky that he was kindhearted because it was not smart of me in advance of my exam, to tell him he had to apologize for his late coming...if he was not "so kind," he could have lowered my grade because I was not respectful to him. I should be delighted he was not a vengeful teacher. Biting my tongue, I left the classroom. What happened? Why was I not allowed to remind him of his lack of respect to me? His behavior made me nervous, and above all how could he say I am not being respectful to him? He was the late one, he did not apologize, and he was disrespectful. I was angry, upset and treated badly. At home my mother told me I should accept his behavior, after all he was the teacher, besides my grade was good, so not to hang on to it. Over thirty-five years later, I still believe I was in the right. His behavior made an impact on me and was never forgotten. Teachers should not use their position to undermine student's feelings and voices. My teacher should have apologized for being late and understood that I was nervous, and not being rude to him; but that he was rude to me. What if I had come over twenty minutes late? I don't think he would have let that go, possibly I would fail the exam or be prohibited to take it.

In my career as a teacher, I have seen this kind of behavior towards students much more than I wanted. Teachers who think they are always right, know it all, refuse to be the learner in situations with their students. Professional colleagues of mine use their position to belittle and suppress students, sometimes on purpose... most of the time not even realizing they do so. Once a student asked me if I had spilled my tea, would I ask him to clean it up? I immediately answered, no of course not, then he told me my colleague did exactly that other day. He was indignant about my colleague's behavior, I couldn't blame him. Traditional educational relationships are built upon the idea that the teacher is superior to the student, there is a hierarchal relationship, and the teacher is more experienced than the student in the topic being taught. This experience does not qualify the teacher to be free to bully the student. I never forget my feelings of unfairness regarding my primary school teacher making fun of a fellow student because he could not reproduce the three times tables. The boy was ten years old and hated school because he didn't fit the system, and most of all because his teacher did not take care of him. Teachers must guide and help their students within in a pedagogical relationship and never misuse their position. My primary school teacher should have understood that this boy had a hard time learning instead of making a fool out of him in front of the group.

I am guilty as well. In my first year as a teacher, I told two eleven years old girls to wash the lipstick off, while I was wearing lipstick myself. They com-

plained it was not fair but went to the bathroom because I demanded them to do so. I still remember probably because I felt regret quickly after the event. Why did I do that? Was it important for me as their substitute teacher? I felt a girl of eleven years old does not wear lipstick, but I was too harsh on them experimenting with make-up. It wasn't a big issue, but an example of a teacher misusing her authority and giving the student no voice.

I found a totally different kind of teaching while doing my Masters degree. Professors asked me about my own choices, they questioned those choices...my voice was always respected. I was allowed to make mistakes and when I asked, my teachers gave their point of view on the matter. It took me a while before I appreciated this way of teaching, I was always waiting for my professors to take action. They were my teachers: I believed they were in charge. Eventually, I learned to speak up for myself, they allowed me my own voice and choices. They encouraged me to ask critical questions about my thoughts and beliefs, I learned not to place another above me. I acknowledged our differences and accepted our equality. When I was treated as unequal, I attempted to discuss my emotions and ask questions about the accuracy of my perceptions. After a conversation with one of my students, I realized she was discouraged, in her opinion I expected too much from her. She was young and not experienced in directing her own life, I didn't know her story and needed to hear her voice to adapt my teaching to her needs and to connect with her again. It was important for me to listen to her and hear her struggles. What did she need from me in order to take self-responsibility and self-directing in her learning? Connection in a pedagogical relationship is essential to make a learning process possible.

If I am not able to dialogue about the subject I retreat. In one case I felt unheard by my professor and left a meeting. When the professor asked me on my way out if I found the meeting not interesting, I told him my feelings, and that it was necessary for him to realize he was not the only voice in the room. He asked me to stay, and promised to do better. In my opinion, he was so full of his own voice that he ignored all the other voices in the room. Ironically, at a conference for critical pedagogy, I realized that even critical pedagogues find hard to keep listening to others. Having a dialogue about equality is a beginning to acknowledge differences and acceptance the possibilities in an educational relationship. Teachers or professors may place themselves above students, but also students have a propensity to place their teachers on a pedestal.

For my German teacher it is too late, he would be retired or maybe not alive. The boy in my primary school class owns a garage now and probably hires someone to do his bookkeeping. When my daughter was about eleven, I let her experiment with lipstick and talked with her about age appropriateness, society, and suitable shades. The past cannot be changed, but we can try to inspire other teachers and pedagogues to treat others with respect. My professors heard my voice and taught me to listen to the voices of others.

### Learning from professional experiences

In my current work as a professor of a University of Applied Sciences, I try to listen to my students, but also to give them the opportunities to let their voices hear... to create an inclusive, creative learning society through a participatory democracy. I am lucky to work with colleagues who feel the same way, and allow students to direct their own learning, to be partners in learning. I ask my students questions, and in small groups we dialogue about their future profession. I attempt to encourage them to be critical pedagogues and ask questions about what, why and how they did, wanted, and how they dared that way of acting chosen in that particular situation.

After ten years, that kind of teaching is still not easy, especially when a student wants me to take control of his or her learning, it is easy to fall into old habits, behavior I was taught while learning to be a schoolteacher. Western tradition in teacher-directed learning assure that students' voices are not influencing their own education. It is a way of teaching in which students learn by doing the by the teacher- provided assignments. At some schools, students are not allowed to speak at all without permission and the teacher has control over the student (Black, 2012), deciding what, how, and when to learn. Often the class is situated in a lecture hall and interactive teaching is not possible. I cannot teach that way anymore. I want to accept differences in learning, give personalized guidance and provide learners with opportunities to learn from. In those opportunities, my students should be able to practice to listen, make decisions for themselves, and take a shared responsibility for learning. I want my students to participate, but even more, become partners in learning and teaching. To do so, I must stay critical in and of my teaching, listen to my students, and regularly evaluate the learning process with them. We are a learning community and together we provide person centered education for democratic fellowship in pedagogy (Fielding, 2011).

Students' voices are important in our educational program. We teach through the educational concept of *Real-life Learning* (Jansen, 2005) in which students' voices are asked for, and listened to. I have learned that their voices are valuable to their motivation for learning and also to me as their teacher. Our students are educated to learn self-directed in cooperation with other students. They have a weekly meeting as a learning team and they, amongst pedagogical topics, dialogue about their processes of learning. Their coach (we prefer coach instead of teacher or professor) joins the learning team meeting every fortnight. Each voice is heard in the learning team, students learn to listen to each other and ask critical questions. They do not just dialogue about their learning processes, but also practice to hear all voices in the context... and, if necessary, advocate the voice of the one who is not heard.

Professionals talk a lot about children but hardly talk with them. The voices of youth are not only not heard but also often ignored. We teach our pedagogues differently and want them to be aware of all voices and hear everyone's story. If we

want them to learn the importance of the appreciation of all voices we, as coaches (teachers), must set the example. We show them how to work with different kind of voices and as partners in learning.

As a coach, I must to listen to my students. How is their progress and sometimes even more important how is their wellbeing as a student? To adapt to students, I need to begin with hearing their voices, but just asking is not enough. As their teacher we need to provide students with opportunities to let them hear their own voices. Dialogue is the most used form in our educational program. And by dialogue, teachers and students are able to connect and learn from each other. We let our students make choices in a learning landscape, an open curriculum with possibilities to choose pedagogical themes from and survey them in one's own way and pace (Buitenhuis and Edes, 2014). Giving students voice and choice is just the first step in personalized learning (Bray & McClaskey, 2015). Because personalized learning can be seen as individualistic, with students as "customers," I would rather speak of person-centered education with a democratic approach, as in critical pedagogy. In this approach an individual is always part of a context. It is not all about you, but it is about you in a communal perspective. Co-directed learning is considered the highest form of learning in our educational program, students are part of a learning team and their choices and voices are always dialogued about. A person is embedded in relations and develops and behaves in the context. One needs the other to be yourself (Margulies, personal communication, October 12, 2011). Pedagogy as a relational science should be taught as an example and teachers; professors should walk their talk, we want more than just to give our students a voice in their own education. We want a collaboration with students in which we co-design educational situations and learn together. When our students are professional pedagogues, we want them to be the next generation to set an example for a sustainable and democratic society. Learning should not stop at graduation. Once we have learned to collaborate and experience the benefits of a democratic fellowship, we are hooked on and never want it to be different. That is what I have experienced myself, and that is also what I hear my students and graduates say.

Every year we evaluate all students and the coaches our educational program, Through dialogues about claims, concerns and issues we reflect on the learning landscape and if we find it necessary we make changes. Over the years we see some returning issues. Not just the coaches, but students too find it very hard to give voice and have choice. They love the idea of having voice, on one hand, but also believe it is easier to consume schooling on the other hand. They like to have control over their individual process but find it difficult to embrace the insecurities it brings them. They ask for more structure, lectures and tools to help learning . As a professor I grew in giving students voice and choice, however, taking the next step to co-design and learn together with my students is still tough. Not only because it is easy to design lessons on my own, but far more because I cannot ignore the voices of students

who want me to be in the lead. My students do not have my experience and are new in participating in their education by me allowing them making their individual choices. Is wanting them to collaborate with me a bridge too far?

Dialogues with students as equals enhance them with possibilities to speak freely about their personal (learning) problems and preferences in education and in our relationship. One of my students told me that I didn't realize what I am asking of my students. All the talking about self-directing and co-directing and wanting students to have voice and choice keeps them, according to that student, away from doing the real learning about becoming a pedagogue. In our program we rarely provide classes about pedagogical knowledge or training in pedagogical handling. We give our students a pedagogical theme and want them to survey a self-interest topic within the theme. Every theme has many possibilities to choose self-interests from. Students survey what they need to know and want to learn about that topic to handle situations around that topic in the pedagogical practice. Our students are motivated to want to learn and to own their learning. A particular student loves to talk about her education, but is now wondering if we have delayed her study. Would she have finished earlier if we had educated with a teacher-directed approach? Yes, she probably would have, but I believe she is a stronger and more independent pedagogue as she finishes our course. The professionals we educated are social entrepreneurs and prepared to deal with many types of pedagogical challenges. They are used to make choices regarding the voices of all involved and take the responsibility for their acting and sometimes solving felt problems within those challenging situations.

Not only students learn, conversations with my students make me learn as well. I learn about my students and what is going on in their pedagogical practice and their lives. Our dialogues keep me informed about what is going on in the work field and in society amongst young people. As a teacher we need to be informed about social and occurring pedagogical issues. My students taught me about Instagram, WhatsApp and Twitter. They are also my link to actual issues like sexting (texting sexual messages, pictures or movies by smartphone or computer), bullying by social media, and hypes that I only hear from in the news. They often know a lot more than me about current life, and see in their work the consequences of those issues for youth. In our learning community, we dialogue about these issues and our responsibilities as pedagogues. They tell me about issues in their practices and together we search for possibilities to handle those issues. Curiosity is namely the most important part that makes learning possible. If one wants to know how to act or how it works, the student will start to investigate and when you think you've "got it," you learn. We as coaches and fellow students are partners. Meeting the other voice, the unknown voice or the different voice challenges us to widen our perspective on ourselves and on the world. We can develop compassion and empathy and qualities that enhance the process of consciousness and the development of others. Democratic education provides the chances to meet other voices.

In 2015 a group of students of the University of Amsterdam occupied their governmental office. Those students felt the university was antiquated in its organization, too old fashioned, and that their demands for change were ignored. They wanted an equal say in running the university: a democratic chosen Board of Directors. The Mayor of Amsterdam and even the Minister of Education came to listen and speak to them. I was astonished. I discussed it with my students, they responded (in the way that I felt) that the Board of that university should come over and see our courses. This would never happen, maybe is impossible when you give your students voice and organize your university in a democratic way. The professor who taught me the importance of self- and co-directed learning, is involved with those students of the University of Amsterdam. When the Board of Directors is open for his advise, I am sure the organization of that university will become more democratic. But when they are stubborn and keep their ancient view of how a university should be led, nothing will change.

Another movement in this university, less political is a group of students and professors, who started their own educational program. I talked to one of the founders and he told me the idea was: if you do not teach us the way we want, we will teach ourselves. Students teach each other, to be aware, and to be a world citizen. According to him that is originally the purpose of education (Wessels, 2017). I agree. A university can be democratic as long as student's voices and/ or teacher's voices are not ignored. We need to get rid of the traditional unequally-organized and financially controlled universities and schools. Opening up for all participating voices in a democratic university is the first step to change the traditional system.

### Learn with and from others

Hans Jansen (2005) was the main founder of *Real-life Learning* and *Ecological Pedagogy*, where students are taught to be self-responsible and self-knowing individuals. In order to provide our students an educational program, in which they are not to be schooled in performing tricks or reproducing stories, we inspire students to learn and to develop professional qualities in what Real-life Learning calls a continuing learning adventure. We, as teachers, as well as our students need to be prepared to change the traditional roles and the student-teacher relationships. We need to think, but also act out of the box in an educational system where teachers traditionally supposed to be in charge. That change of the educational relationship asks courage and a constant taking of responsibility for one's actions. We listen to the needs, experiences, feelings and emotions of students and teachers. In order to adept on the world and culture of others we need to dialogue and empathy their needs, experiences and felt emotions. We need to hear all voices and be able to dialogue and question our thoughts, beliefs and do what we believe is good. In our learning teams together we ponder about voices, choices, challenges, boundaries, possibilities and our significance as professionals.



Our way of teaching evolved out of Real-life Learning, and always seem to be under pressure by the hierarchy of authorities. Learning is institutionalized in schools and theoretically justified by the superior ‘expertise’ of those on the top (Black, 2012). As teachers we want to give our students voice but do we have voice ourselves? Are we not controlled by national standards and dependent of funding by the government (Jansen, 2009)? Politics, finances, cynicism and the fear of not being in control threaten our educational system. Is the fear legitimate of getting discharged when you disagree with the system, and your voice too threatening for the people at the top? Sadly, enough this recently was reality for one of my colleagues. Joe Kincheloe (personal communication, 2006) taught me that you have to know the system and its boundaries to play with the system and find the possibilities. I will never forget the story of his experience with an educational inspector in his school district. In his seventh-grade social studies class he taught his students exactly how to work by the book, but the minute they knew what they “had to know,” they began learning the way they needed to learn. They chose their own topics and learned through personalized experience. If the inspector came to the school, a colleague of Joe’s sent a pair of red scissors as a signal to Joe’s class. Within seconds the students got their books out and they pretended to be immersed with the prepared lesson.

My experience teaching through Real-life Learning and Ecological Pedagogy has taught me that is not easy to conform with boundaries and to have a constant awareness and criticality of what I am doing, and how to fit the system of my university. According to Giroux (2017) we have to struggle for justice together in order to make history instead of being swept away. Giving voice to students in education is more recognized as important in learning and development, but the possibilities to do so are still limited. Our education is not yet organized in a totally democratic way. Student councils, student ambassadors, and evaluation panels are installed. But these panels only have an authority to give their voice afterwards, they are not part of developing the educational program, only allowed to give an opinion and the possibility to agree or disagree after the educational design/decision is made. They can give feedback but are hardly ever involved in designing a curriculum. That is still a top-down privilege to a small group of teachers or administrators. In our learning landscape that is not different.

Along with critical pedagogues like Hans Jansen, Joe Kincheloe, and Henry Giroux, our educational program is inspired by John Dewey (participation and democracy in education); Maria Montessori (trust the power of students); Janusz Korczak (equality for and acceptance of everyone); Lev Vygotsky (the important role for processes of communication in education); Celestin Freinet (education is part of life); and Paulo Freire (awareness, freedom and hope).

Dewey (1938, 1999) claims development exists by a constant reconstruction of experiences, a reflexive and everlasting process. Education should create situations that challenge students to investigate those contexts and develop a work-

ing balance between abstract and concrete, between an open mind and reliance on theories. According to Dewey, active and participative learning is crucial for learning. In our educational program we have learning teams as the center of interaction and communication within our learning landscape. Students are not tested on the content of theories but are asked for a critical review and dialogue about those theories. In literature you find formal knowledge constructed by an author. The voice of the writer needs to be treated as a learning experience and, as well as the other experiences need, to be explored, to be analyzed and interpreted.

The development of the learning landscape for Montessori teachers was the first elaborated draft of the model Jansen designed. Like the children at a Montessori school the student-teachers learn to teach, the developers of the learning landscape found students-teachers as well needed to learn to make their own choices in what and when to learn (Jansen, 2005b). Like the beliefs of Maria Montessori, in the learning landscape students learn self-directed and in heterogenic (students from different phases of the program together) groups. The voice of every student is taken into account and not less than the voice of a professor or practitioner. We ask our students to collect multiple voices and ponder and dialogue about all perspectives and all that is said.

The pedagogy of Korczak is only known since the 1980s, even though he was deported and killed in 1942 (Kroon & Levering, 2016). Korczak gave the children in his orphanage voice. He respected and valued the children the same as he did adults and learned from them by truly listening to them. His beliefs were an inspiration and guide for the Convention on the Rights of the Child of the United Nations. We respect our students' voices and treat them as learning-partners and co-researchers.

As the theories of Korczak in Polish were translated in the eighties, also the theory of the Russian Vygotsky was only translated in the 1970s. Lev Vygotsky researched the relationship between individual and culture and the role of communication in education (Kroon & Levering, 2016). Each individual learns by his or her own context and the used interaction within that context provides a significant addition to development. In our program we are dialogue-centered. Dialogue with learning-partners, professors, youth, practitioners, experts, and experienced people, is recommended. We learn with others and by others.

Célestin Freinet was from France. He is less famous than the reform pedagogues like Montessori and Dewey, but his theory is no less inspirational. Typically, Freinet is thought of through free writing and the printing press, but in our program we use his ideas about workshops. In a workshop according to Freinet students have open space in which to explore a topic. Our Open Space workshops are also digital and named Our Space. Students are not used to open space, and in the beginning, they often find it very hard to take chances.

The last inspirational pedagogue for Ecological Pedagogy and Real-life Learning is Paulo Freire and his commitment to a human-dignified pedagogy. His

legacy has a great influence on critical pedagogy. Freire accentuated the need of love and hope for education in order to create empowerment and transformation. Our learning teams are based upon Freire's theory of praxis and dialogue. Our students come together in a small group to dialogue and critically reflect upon their reality and reform it through action. Students learn to speak for themselves and develop critical awareness.

Most thinkers and developed theories spoken above are from the first half of the 20th century. We are decades further, but those theories are still relevant. Were those voices back then irrelevant or not heard? Will we ever learn? Or perhaps pedagogical discussions are of all times? Philosophers writing about education goes back to Socrates in the 4th Century BC. When we read some of their quotes you realize learning and pedagogy indeed are part of life. Some kind of education will always be part of life as well.

### Implications for voice in the context of critical pedagogy

Our concept of learning gives hope for an educational future in which students are happy with their education. Professors who believe education is part of life, are able to connect, to dialogue, and be an example to others. We need to keep on discussing the progressive and not to be forgotten work of people like Joe Kincheloe and Jesús "Pato" Gómez. And give critical pedagogues who argue traditional educational structures like Shirley Steinberg and Henry Giroux stage. We should embrace and share good practices of the importance of giving students voice. Social media and the Internet give us the opportunities to global sharing. Most of all, let us keep in touch with people in front of us: our students, colleagues and other professionals.

We cannot foresee the future of our lives and also of education. Learning from our educational experiences in the past and reflecting on the present can give us guidance in acting in the future. The most important part is to keep in touch with each other, keeping away from hierarchal structures, listening to pedagogical voices instead of financial voices. Let us create democratic ways of learning and of organizing education. By designing our education in dialogue with its users we can provide education that lasts.

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