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Feedback methods for Student Voice in the digital age

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Abstract

Central to the concept of Student Voice is the communication of student feedback to educators. Feedback can assume a great variety of forms, and effectiveness and appropriacy of different feedback methods may vary. The present research investigates student perceptions of two traditional feedback methods – pen-and-paper questionnaires and oral question-and-answer reports – compared against feedback obtained through the use of three digital technology tools (Socrative, TodaysMeet and Google Drive). The findings suggest that the use of digital technologies in Student Voice contexts is likely to be highly effective due to the overwhelming positive attitude of students towards these tools.

Keywords: Student Voice, continuous student feedback, Socrative, TodaysMeet, Google Drive

Introduction

The essence of Student Voice is that education proceeds best when there is student participation and engagement in teaching and learning (Furlong & Davies, 2012). Student Voice emphasizes the importance of listening to students, understanding the social world of the classroom, perceiving the learning experience of different students, and developing a classroom fit for students' needs and expectations (Arnot & Reay, 2004). Student Voice is concerned with active involvement as feedback providers and material co-developers (Fielding, 2004; Kayi-Aydar, 2013), and recognises that students are generally insightful and collaborative partners in education (Meighan, 1978; Rudduck, 2006). By empowering students to voice their opinions and to contribute to classroom activities, Student Voice facilitates productive communication between teachers and students. This ultimately leads to better academic performance for students and facilitates in the professional development of teachers (Liew, 2010; Cho & Auger, 2013). Rooted in Bakhtin's notions of the centrality of dialogue in learning (Sutton 2009), dialogic interactions allow students to 'introduce alternative frames of reference which are open to negotiation' and where 'the criteria or relevance' is not imposed wholly by the teacher (Hardman 2008: 133-134). Fielding (2004) notes that "the promise of a dialogic model of student voice is considerable" and that "the potential for transformation is more likely to reside in arrangements which require the active

engagement of students and teachers working in partnership than in those which either exclude teachers or treat student voice as an instrument of teacher or state purposes” (306).

Central, then, to the concept of Student Voice is the communication of student input to educators. Feedback can assume a great variety of forms, each of which may have different levels of effectiveness and appropriacy in various contexts (see Merry, Price, Carless, and Taras 2013). Two commonly used traditional feedback methods are pen-and-paper questionnaires and oral question-and-answer reports. Today, however, a number of electronic feedback tools are also available, and these may be of relevance given the pervasive use of digital technologies in the daily lives of many young people. Indeed, it has been noted that “young people’s engagement with new technologies is intrinsically bound up with their personal identity – who they are as young people” (Furlong & Davies, 2012: 50) and that utilising digital technology feedback tools can provide students with “a keen sense of agency” (60). This suggests that using digital technologies to facilitate feedback in Student Voice contexts might prove to be highly effective. However, to date, there appear to have been no studies on student perceptions of traditional feedback methods in comparison to those offered by digital technology.

The present research investigated student perceptions of three methods of continuous student feedback collection – pen-and-paper questionnaires, oral question-and-answer reports, and digital technology methods – in a Student Voice context. The research aimed to find out what method of feedback collection students felt most effective, and what advantages and disadvantages students perceived in the three feedback methods.

Methodology

Ninety-three non-English-major freshmen, aged 17 to 20 with a female/male ratio of 3:2, volunteered to participate in the study. The participants had been assigned to six different English classes based on their English proficiency levels and majors. The first languages of the participants were Cantonese and Mandarin, and all were advanced English learners who had gained level 5 or above in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination, approximately equivalent to a 7.0 IELTS score (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority).

The study was part of Hong Kong Polytechnic University’s project “Empowering learning: Introducing continuous feedback collection practices in English language courses”, and passed all requisite institutional ethical review processes. The course consisted of one

classroom lesson per week for 13 weeks. Information on the purpose and possible effects of the research were explained to all students in week 1, after which feedback was collected in each of the following 12 weeks. The purpose of the feedback was to let students participate in an ongoing process of negotiating what was taught and how it should be taught.

Three types of feedback collection methods were used: pen-and-paper questionnaires, oral question-and-answer reports, and digital technological platforms (Socrative, TodaysMeet, and Google Drive). The pen-and-paper questionnaires were distributed to students at the beginning of lessons and collected at the end. The participants were encouraged to comment on the lessons freely. The oral question-and-answer reports were conducted after lessons had finished. Open-ended questions such as What do you think of today's lesson?, What did you like/dislike?, and What did you feel was interesting/boring/useful/useless? were asked. For digital tools lessons, the participants were asked to log on to the platforms at the beginning of the lesson and provide feedback whenever they wanted. The three digital tools were selected as they were known to be already familiar to the students involved in the study, and are grouped together here as representative of digital feedback mechanisms in general. Despite the differences between the three digital tools and the traditional feedback methods, the ultimate goal for the purposes of the study was to enable student feedback on lessons and thus give students an active say in the educational process.

Socrative is an online platform where students enter their answers to pre-prepared questions using mobile devices. It gives teachers instant insight into classroom practices through real-time questioning (Dervan, 2014). TodaysMeet visualizes collaborative and parallel conversations in a backchannel through a digital classroom where every student has a voice. Google Drive enables users to edit documents and interactive notes cooperatively. The three tools are free to use (TodaysMeet in the basic version). The course was taught with a student-centred approach which involved students in classroom decisions according to their feedback. The teacher checked digital feedback when students were doing reading tasks, group discussions, or other in-class activities. The main lesson content was prepared before class, but minor revisions to the lesson plan, such as changing the length of time on a certain task or the type of activity for a learning point, were based on students' in-class feedback. For comments or queries that were unique to one student, the teacher would send a response through the digital tools or write a response on the classroom white board, in other cases, the teacher would address the issue for the whole class orally or else on the classroom computer screen or white board. On the whole, the students and teacher were able to balance

performing classwork and giving and responding to feedback via the digital technologies. For this study, all digital technological tools were set to allow anonymous feedback.

To maintain similar usage frequencies for the different tools among the six student groups, the three feedback methods were rotated every three weeks so that each type was used four times throughout the semester (as per Table 1). Each digital technological platform was used exclusively among two groups of students so that every group used the traditional methods (pen-and-paper questionnaires and oral question-and-answer reports) four times, while two groups used Socrative four times, two used TodaysMeet four times, and two used Google Drive four times.

Students were asked to comment on the teaching materials and activities from a range of aspects such as level of difficulty, engagement, and usefulness. Students were also encouraged to ask questions, make suggestions, or report difficulties. In addition, during each lecture, an observation journal was kept to record what happened in the classroom, focusing on whether and when students enjoyed or proactively participated in classroom activities.

After the course ended, a questionnaire was distributed to students (see Appendix 1). The questions were deliberately open-ended in order to allow students to freely respond without predetermined prompting. The questionnaire simply asked students what approaches to feedback collection they felt most effective for communicating their feedback to teachers and fellow students, and what advantages and disadvantages they perceived with the three methods. In addition, interviews were conducted with 20 participants to obtain more detailed insight to the questionnaire responses. Feedback from the three digital platforms was logged and kept for analysis. The resulting data was then read twice in order to detect student commentary on the advantages/disadvantages: first, to gain a holistic impression, and second, to identify specific comments about the feedback methods. These comments were then matched to advantages/disadvantages mentioned in the questionnaire and interviews.

Results and discussion

The survey data showed that 84 out of 93 (90.3%) participants found the digital technological tools (Socrative, TodaysMeet and Google Drive) were the most effective approach to feedback collection, with only 6 (6.5%) favouring pen-and-paper questionnaires, and 3 (3.2%) favouring oral question-and-answer reports. Table 2 summarises questionnaire responses on the advantages and disadvantages of the three types of feedback collection tool.

The number of positive respondents is followed by the percentage of overall participants in parentheses.

Table 2: Advantages and disadvantages of feedback methods

	Advantages		Disadvantages	
pen-and-paper questionnaires	convenient	37 (39.8%)	not anonymous	68 (73.1%)
	quick	21 (22.6%)	outdated	36 (38.7%)
	simple/easy	12 (12.9%)	time-consuming	18 (19.4%)
oral reports	speaking practice	49 (52.7%)	not anonymous	91 (97.8%)
	convenient	17 (18.3%)	stressful	76 (81.7%)
	quick	9 (9.7%)	awkward	34 (36.6%)
digital technological platforms	fun/cool/not boring	92 (98.9%)	access difficulties	42 (45.2%)
	anonymous	88 (94.6%)	disruptive	28 (30.1%)
	multiple interactions	67 (72.4%)		
	instant response	49 (52.7%)		
	record of feedback	32 (34.4%)		

Pen-and-paper questionnaires

Students reported three advantages of pen-and-paper questionnaires, namely that they were convenient (39.8% of respondents), quick (22.6%), and simple (12.9%). However, these figures are somewhat undermined by the fact that another 19.4% reported that the pen-and-paper questionnaires were time-consuming. There was also a perception that collecting students feedback via pen-and-paper questionnaires was old-fashioned and outdated (38.7% of respondents). This may potentially have a negative impact on the ultimate utility of this feedback method with present-day students who perceive themselves as ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). The strongest disadvantage reported was the lack of anonymity of the feedback method (73.1% of respondents). Although the pen-and-paper questionnaires did not require students to give their names, the potential for the teacher to be able to recognise handwriting of individual students led to the perceived loss of anonymity. None of the advantages of pen-and-paper questionnaires were reported by over 50% of the respondents.

Oral question-and-answer reports

The strongest advantage reported for oral reports was that they gave students speaking practice, reported by just over half the students (52.7%). This advantage was pertinent in the

Hong Kong context where English is largely an L2 language, though would not be expected to be as large in an L1 context. The other two advantages listed by students were reported by less than a fifth of the total respondents, namely, that oral reports were convenient (18.3%) and quick 9.7%. In contrast, students had stronger feelings about the disadvantages of this feedback method. Again, the lack of anonymity, which is absolute with face-to-face oral feedback, was paramount (reported by 97.8%). Allied to this is the fact that 81.7% reported that they found oral feedback stressful, and 36.6% reported that they found it awkward. Together these feelings may adversely affect the genuineness of the feedback. As one student explained in the interview:

- Actually, I'm a little bit nervous when I talk to the teacher about my feedback of her teaching. I need to consider whether it's appropriate or not, whether my comments are correct, and whether she likes it. So I don't know what to say. So I just say that everything is good.

Digital technological tools

The results from questionnaires revealed that students perceived five main advantages digital technological tools had over pen-and-paper questionnaires and oral question-and-answer reports for feedback collection, namely, fun, anonymity, multiple interactions, instant response, and record of feedback. These are discussed below in more detail, supplemented with data from the interviews.

(1) Fun/cool/not boring

Students overwhelmingly perceived the use of the digital technological platforms for feedback in a positive light, describing it variously as fun, cool, and not boring. Responses such as these were listed as advantages by 98.9% of respondents. Questionnaire answers included statements such as “Socrative is so creative! It's fun”, “I enjoy communicating through digital platforms. It's full of fun”, “Love technology. It's cool” and “TodaysMeet is awesome, much more enjoyable”. Data from the interviews gave more detail, revealing that the use of such technology was bound up with students' self-identifying as ‘digital natives’.

- It's fashionable to talk without speaking. I mean, I talk with my phone; it's cool and I like it. So I don't consider giving feedback as a task required by the teacher. I don't feel it's a burden, and I'm willing to participate in it... so I pay more attention to the class, want to know what to say later, like whether this topic is interesting or that activity is useful. So I learn harder [better].

- I enjoy digital stuff. It's easier for me. I don't like speaking or writing. I feel more comfortable to text my feedback. It's interesting and fun, not boring at all, so I participate in it very actively. Also, I enjoy giving feedback and seeing that the teacher listen to me, my suggestions. Like one time, I recommended a video and the teacher used it. I feel very happy.
- Commenting on teachers' teaching in TodaysMeet is like commenting on friends' posts in Facebook. It feels natural to me. It's of my style. I'm used to it, and I do it naturally and enjoy doing it.
- It's fun to interact with others in this way. It's more advanced and exciting. Come on, it's 2015 now. [...] We are born in the digital age; we use our phones every minute; we communicate through digital tools [...] The digital way of giving feedback is closer to us, it's designed for us, and we love it.

In contrast, the student responses on the traditional feedback methods was entirely devoid of similar positive attitudes. Indeed, 38.7% of students specifically listed 'outdated' as a disadvantage of pen-and-paper questionnaires.

(2) Anonymity

Anonymity, which cannot occur with oral feedback, and is difficult to guarantee with hand-written feedback due to handwriting recognition, was indicated as a main advantage of digital technological tools for feedback collection by 94.6% participants. This tallies with the fact that the lack of anonymity was regarded as a disadvantage of oral reports by 97.8% of respondents, and by 73.1% of respondents for pen-and-paper feedback. A consequence of the anonymity provided by the digital technological tools is evident in the feedback comments themselves, which were typically more honest and openly critical of classroom practices than the feedback from the traditional non-anonymous feedback methods, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Typical comments collected through the three feedback tools

digital technological tools	pen-and-paper questionnaires	oral question-and-answer reports
• I've already learnt these sentence starters in my middle school. I don't come to the university for	• I like watching videos. • The discussion topic is very interesting. • More games please.	• S: I've learnt a lot today. - T: What have you learnt? - S: Many things, like academic style... um...

such useless stuff. I want more advanced languages. • I need more preparation time for this presentation task. • It's better if we search resources and read them independently first, and then have group discussion. We have little to talk about now.		referencing. • T: Do you enjoy doing the referencing exercises? S: Um... I think they are important..
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According to the interviews, anonymity in feedback allowed students to disclose authentic feelings, to openly report difficulties or problems, and to provide negative but constructive suggestions concerning teaching materials and classroom activities. In contrast, with the traditional methods, students hesitated to give negative feedback for two reasons. First, from concerns about possible influence on their grades, not wanting to put the teacher off side, and second, for the sake of their self-esteem, not wishing to openly admit to finding the material challenging. Explanations for such behaviour is evident in the interview transcripts.

- I don't write negative feedback. I don't want the teacher to know that it's me. You know, you can tell it from the handwriting... If it's really a bad activity, the teacher will know it. Other students will tell her. I don't want to be the one.
- I only express my criticism through digital technological tools, because they are anonymous. No one really likes criticism. [...] I can write negative through digital technological tools because no one knows it's me.
- I feel safe when it's anonymous. [...] I can express my authentic feelings. No one will laugh at me or look down upon me.

These extracts show that students are sensitive to issues of power in their educational environment, leading to a certain level of guardedness in non-anonymous feedback scenarios. Obviously, more honest feedback is of greater use for teachers in allowing them to better assess student needs and adjust teaching or materials accordingly. Hence, the anonymity that

digital technological tools can provide ultimately leads to empowerment of student opinion and input.

(3) Multiple interactions

Traditional feedback collection through pen-and-paper questionnaires and oral reports, usually only supplies one-way feedback, from student to teacher. In contrast, digital technological tools enable students to give feedback to peers as well as the teacher. This was reported as an advantage of digital technological tools by 72.4% of respondents. The following is an example of dialogic feedback among five students, extracted from Google Drive:

Student A: What's el al.?

Student B: p11. [the explanation is on page 11 of the student notes]

Student A: OIC.

Student C: Thanks. I don't know either.

Student A: Referencing is boring.

Student B: But we need it to support our position.

Student C: It's more convincing.

Student D: Do we also need a reference list for the NT assignment? [the "NT assignment" is for another course]

Student B: Yes.

Student E: All assignments need referencing.

Student A: OK.

This example shows students proactively providing immediate feedback to other students, improving "student interaction, engagement, active-learning, and participation" (Dervan, 2014: 1804). This is also facilitative in the development of students' independent learning skills, promoting a culture of asking and answering questions among the students. As one student noted in the interviews: "I also learn from others' feedback. Sometimes I don't know I have similar questions until it is reported by others. It helps me better understand everything."

(4) Immediacy of response

Another advantage identified by students for the digital technological tools was the immediacy of response, reported as an advantage by 52.7% of respondents. The digital technological tools were set up so that students could generate real-time feedback while the

lesson was in progress. In contrast, feedback collection through pen-and-paper questionnaires and oral question-and-answer reports was conducted at the end of the lesson, and could only be used for following lessons. Real-time feedback provided by the digital technological tools enabled teachers to respond and adjust teaching content immediately according to students' needs or preferences. An example from the observation journal illustrates how this interaction can work. In a lesson on coherence in academic writing, students engaged in the following discussion on the online platform TodaysMeet.

Student A: Theories are boring.

Student B: Theories are useless.

Student C: Samples?

Student D: Yes, samples might be more helpful.

Student A: Contexts are important.

Student E: LOL. I vote for samples.

In response to this dialogic feedback, the teacher moved on to exemplifying the theoretical strategies for achieving coherence with some samples. The samples provided engaged the students' interest and they began to take down notes. Further, some students showed their satisfaction on TodaysMeet through such comments as "LOL Samples are good," "Good explanation," and "This is useful." Interview commentary reinforced the positive assessment of the immediacy of response made possible by digital technological tools.

- We can feel whether the teacher listens to us, whether she changes the activities according to our feedback. It could be a big change, or a small one, but we'll know it immediately. And it's important for us, because we care whether the teacher cares about us.
- If I ask the teacher to teach something, and she really teaches it, even though she did not originally plan to teach it, but she does it for me, I'll learn it wholeheartedly, because it's for me. This's important.
- TodaysMeet and Google Drive are more effective than questionnaire and oral report, because they enable us to tell the teacher what we want to do in the next minute, and the teacher can then teach what we want to learn. They make our lessons more flexible and meaningful.

Students were able to directly see the connection between their feedback and the behaviour of the teacher. As Fielding (2004: 307) notes, students will soon tire of invitations to give

feedback that seldom result in actions that are beneficial for them. The lag-time in response to feedback that can result from using pen-and-paper questionnaires or oral reports may therefore reduce students' active participation in feedback on lessons. From the teacher's point of view, the interactive feedback of the digital platforms serves as an additional monitoring tool, complementing observation of student activity, facial expressions, body language, reactions, etc.

(5) Record of feedback

Digital technological platforms, such as Google Drive, TodaysMeet and Socrative, keep a record of all student feedback and allow every user to read other users' feedback freely. This was reported as an advantage by 34.4% of respondents. Even though some students did not actively participate in the dialogic feedback, they were still able to benefit from reading and following the learning dialogue both in class and afterwards. As one student stated, "digital tools are more effective as they keep track of everything. I can come back and read all feedback. It's interesting. Good for reflection." In contrast, the two traditional feedback methods did not provide students a record of the feedback given.

Disadvantages of digital technological platforms

In comparison to advantages, students reported fewer disadvantages for digital technologies. The most common disadvantage noted was access difficulties, such as login problems or slow internet connections (reported by 45.2% of respondents). However, this was only mentioned as a hypothetical problem: "there may be technical problem (server shut down)", and "What if we don't have internet connection?", as opposed to an experiential one. The second most common disadvantage listed was the disruptive nature of the digital technological feedback (reported by 30.1% of respondents). This included the disruptive nature of the feedback platforms themselves, "When I'm multitasking, I cannot concentrate well on the learning points", but also the temptation of social media platforms to draw attention away from the lesson.

- I keep checking my whatsapp. The messages just bump out. It's disruptive.
- I cannot prevent myself from viewing Facebook when my fingers touch the phone.

Concomitant with this, however, students also admitted that the distraction of social media interaction was a more pervasive and persistent problem:

- It's hard for me to control myself when I have the freedom to use my phone in class. There are too many disruptions for me. Sometimes, I wish the teacher forbids us using phones. But it won't work, haha, because we'll use it anyway.
- It's difficult to focus on the learning sometimes [...] we may be texting our friends, writing a Facebook post, or something else, surfing on the internet, and the teacher don't know. He may think that we're writing feedback. Actually, we always do that.

Albeit less than a third of students noted this as a problem, clearly being distracted off topic by in-class technology is the single most worrying drawback of the digital technologies investigated in this study, and the potential for such distraction is reason enough for many educators to forbid the use of any technology in class. Nevertheless, this is not to say that distraction of this type is inevitable as soon as digital technology is present, and means of mitigating or avoiding such distraction exist in such forms as engaging lessons, a positive student attitude/commitment towards in-class work, a collaborative and cooperative classroom atmosphere, and so on, as well as technological solutions that effectively bar off-platform digital access (though, none of the tools assessed here offer this functionality at present).

Conclusion

The present research undertook to examine student perceptions of three feedback methods: pen-and-paper questionnaires, oral question-and-answer reports, and digital technology tools. Overwhelmingly students felt that digital technology tools were the most effective, and listed as advantages the fact that using digital technology for feedback was fun, provided anonymity, allowed multiple interactions and immediate responses, and kept a record of feedback. In contrast, students felt the lack of anonymity inherent in the two traditional feedback methods to be a distinct disadvantage, and moreover reported that these led to less genuine feedback motivated by a desire to not displease the teacher. This was especially apparent with the oral reports, which students moreover claimed created anxiety. The anonymity provided by digital technology tools allowed students to be more honest in providing feedback. These findings have significant implications for Student Voice, and strongly suggest further study in anonymous versus non-anonymous feedback mechanisms would be of value. One limitation of this research is the fact that some of the positive attitudes expressed by students, for example, the 'fun' factor may be in part attributable the novelty of the feedback mechanism, and the sense of fun might wear thin after longer exposure to the feedback method. This suggests the necessity of long-term studies of this

topic. Another limitation is that the findings only report student *perceptions* of effectiveness, and while student perceptions are obviously a very important part of the effectiveness of feedback mechanisms, further studies are required to explore the impact of digital technology feedback tools in more depth.

It should be noted here also that the digital technology tools were not universally preferred by students (around 10% of students preferred questionnaires or oral reports) which highlights the fact that no one tool is going to suit the individual needs of every student and teachers must use their own judgement for which feedback mechanisms will work best for specific students, classes, and educational contexts, as well as the practicalities attendant on the possibility of using more than one feedback mechanism.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire given to students

1. Among the three approaches to feedback collection: paper-and-pen questionnaires, question-and-answer oral reports, and digital technological platforms (Socrative, TodaysMeet and Google Drive), which do you think is **most** effective? (Please circle it.)
2. Among the three approaches to feedback collection: paper-and-pen questionnaires, question-and-answer oral reports, and digital technological platforms (Socrative, TodaysMeet and Google Drive), which do you think is **least** effective? (Please circle it.)
3. Are there any advantages of paper-and-pen questionnaires? If yes, what are they?
4. Are there any disadvantages of paper-and-pen questionnaires? If yes, what are they?
5. Are there any advantages of question-and-answer oral reports? If yes, what are they?
6. Are there any disadvantages of question-and-answer oral reports? If yes, what are they?
7. Are there any advantages of the digital technological platforms (Socrative, TodaysMeet and Google Drive)? If yes, what are they?
8. Are there any disadvantages of the digital technological platforms (Socrative, TodaysMeet and Google Drive)? If yes, what are they?