

Learner voice: involving learners as co-constructors of effective teaching and learning



Yvonne Richards

Yvonne Richards, head of school Entry and Foundation at New College Nottingham, set out to work with learners to gain their opinions about learning in the college and use this feedback to enhance it.

Yvonne trained 11 learners in observing lessons, focusing on three things that went well, and three things that would be ‘even better if...’ The learners then had to feed back their findings to the tutor observed, and professional development was structured accordingly. Students’ morale and their attitude to learning improved through the project.

Yvonne recalls how initially she thought it would be challenging to get her colleagues on board with her learner voice project, as there was potential for tension if the process was anything but professional, respectful and constructive. It was important to gain their support, as the learners would be going into their lessons and observing. Those who had worked with student voice approaches in the past were enthusiastic, and their positive experiences encouraged others to get involved too. Some still had reservations about whether the learners would behave and work constructively as observers, but by the end of the project the learners had exceeded all their expectations and the staff had been impressed with their professionalism.

How Yvonne involved the learners

All learners were encouraged to take part in the project, regardless of their former behaviour within the college. This enabled Yvonne to get views from across the range of learners. Asking learners to observe lessons involved much planning and preparation. Yvonne felt it important to stress to them that they were primarily observing the learners, and that their observations would be used to improve things and promote change in the college.

Preparing the learners also meant teaching them about what good observation and feedback was. To help them understand how to observe a lesson analytically, Yvonne gave each observer a ‘checklist’ which included things like ‘are the learners contributing to the lesson?’ and ‘are they being challenged?’ To prepare them for giving good feedback, Yvonne went into a lesson with a group of learners for a short time and then discussed what they’d observed afterwards – using role play to display effective feedback. It was important that the learners understood that all feedback was confidential and how to be courteous in giving it.

The learners involved were much more critical of other learners than Yvonne expected, with some getting quite irritated when some learners didn’t settle down to their work straight away or continued talking when they were not supposed to. This also enabled the observers to question their own behaviour in sessions, with one saying “I didn’t realise it was so hard to teach!” She explains how she was initially quite concerned that the observers would simply focus on criticisms of tutors and the college, but found that they were very much focused on the learners and what they were doing. She found it rewarding to gain these new perspectives and to look at things that the staff hadn’t considered before.

Overall the student observers adopted a professional approach and took their roles and their training seriously. Yvonne remembers that one of the most valuable things was giving them all an ID badge with ‘student observer’ on it. They appreciated the responsibility that came with this, and the belief that they could make a difference to learning and teaching.

What the learners’ observations revealed

In terms of what was already going well, in just under half (41 per cent) of the 51 observations carried out, learners were observed to be involved and enthusiastic whilst a quarter of the observations showed that aims and objectives were well explained and learners had a good understanding of lessons. The main areas for improvement identified through the observations were behaviour, which the learners felt should be challenged more, and an appreciation that the classroom environment (i.e. that it is friendly etc) is important for learning.

What went well	%
Learners involved and enthusiastic	41 %
Aims and objectives explained and a good understanding of lessons	25 %
Friendly environment	11 %
Good use of activities and resources	8 %
Constant checking of understanding	5 %
Well supported	4 %
Relaxed attitude to learning	3 %
Definite learning observed	3 %
Even better if...	
Behaviour had been challenged	45 %
Environment affected learning	24 %
Aims and objectives were explained	7 %
Differentiation	7 %
Learners had correct equipment for lessons	7 %
Learners were given enough time to answer questions	5 %
Tutor had been in lessons at all times	5 %

Yvonne’s inquiry work was supported by the research laboratory sites project run by CUREE on behalf of LSIS. A fuller summary of Yvonne’s work will be published shortly on LSIS’s research website.