

A missing voice: students as co-inquirers in higher education research

Introduction

The process of globalisation and neo-liberal market structure has considerably added to the multiple uncertainties experienced by current university across contexts. Congruent with the increasing precariousness at the level of policy and structure is the growing significance of economic efficiency which redefines the purpose and the role of university as a social institution (Giroux, 2005). Higher education institutions compete with each others locally and globally adopting practices and values to offer distinctive learning opportunities to customers who are increasingly concerned about high quality learning experience (Kandiko, 2013).

Within this context, student is placed at the heat of the education system (BIS, 2011). Consequently, research into student voice and student engagement has proliferated more than ever. It has been noted, however, that student voice is largely missing and student engagement is characterised by tokenism or superficial involvement in higher education research (Cook-Sather, 2002). The under-utilized nature of research collaborations between students and researchers warrant considerable rethinking if universities are genuinely interested in creating spaces for student voice. The opportunities for student engagement and student voice should lead to effective participation of students that result in effective contributions to changes in higher education policy and practice as well as their life worlds. Within the higher education research context, however, the superficial involvement of students at different stages of data collection is often misinterpreted as providing spaces for student voice. Therefore, practices and misrecognitions associated with student engagement and student voice in higher education research command reconceptualization.

Student voice in this paper covers a range of activities that encourage discussion, reflection, dialogue and action on issues that concern students (Fielding, 2004). It includes creating spaces for airing student's own opinions, thoughts and critical perspectives throughout the process of designing, conducting analysing and disseminating the insights of the particular research study discussed in this paper. Student engagement reflects the active, voluntary participation of students at different stages of the inquiry, their purposeful actions, reflections which lead to deeper understanding about the research and the knowledge that emerged through the engagement with the research (Fredricks et al., 2004).

The post-research reflective conversations

The analysis of post-research reflective conversations is influenced by the social constructivist view of making knowledge (see Berger & Luckman, 1996) and the theory of *communicative action* developed by Habermas (1984, 1987). Of particular relevance here is the theory of *life world* and *system world* developed within the theory of communicative action and the discussions on three types of knowledge-constitutive interests: *technical, practical and emancipatory* (Habermas, 1972).

The student engagement in the post-research reflective conversations is an opportunity for critical articulation of actions which created spaces for students to act, reflect, challenge and problematize their current understandings of life worlds and the system world which they encountered and explored during the inquiry process. Life world comprises the everyday life of students through which they (re)construct their own mobile identities, participate in and create their own culture of living and knowing. System world constitutes the institutional frameworks, rules and norms the students have to adhere to derive the benefits of learning to enhance their life worlds within the larger society.

The research context

The study in which the students acted and participated as co-inquirers with the main researcher was focussed on exploring how undergraduate and postgraduate students in three different universities in India, Ireland and UK make meaning of being university learners in the twenty first century.

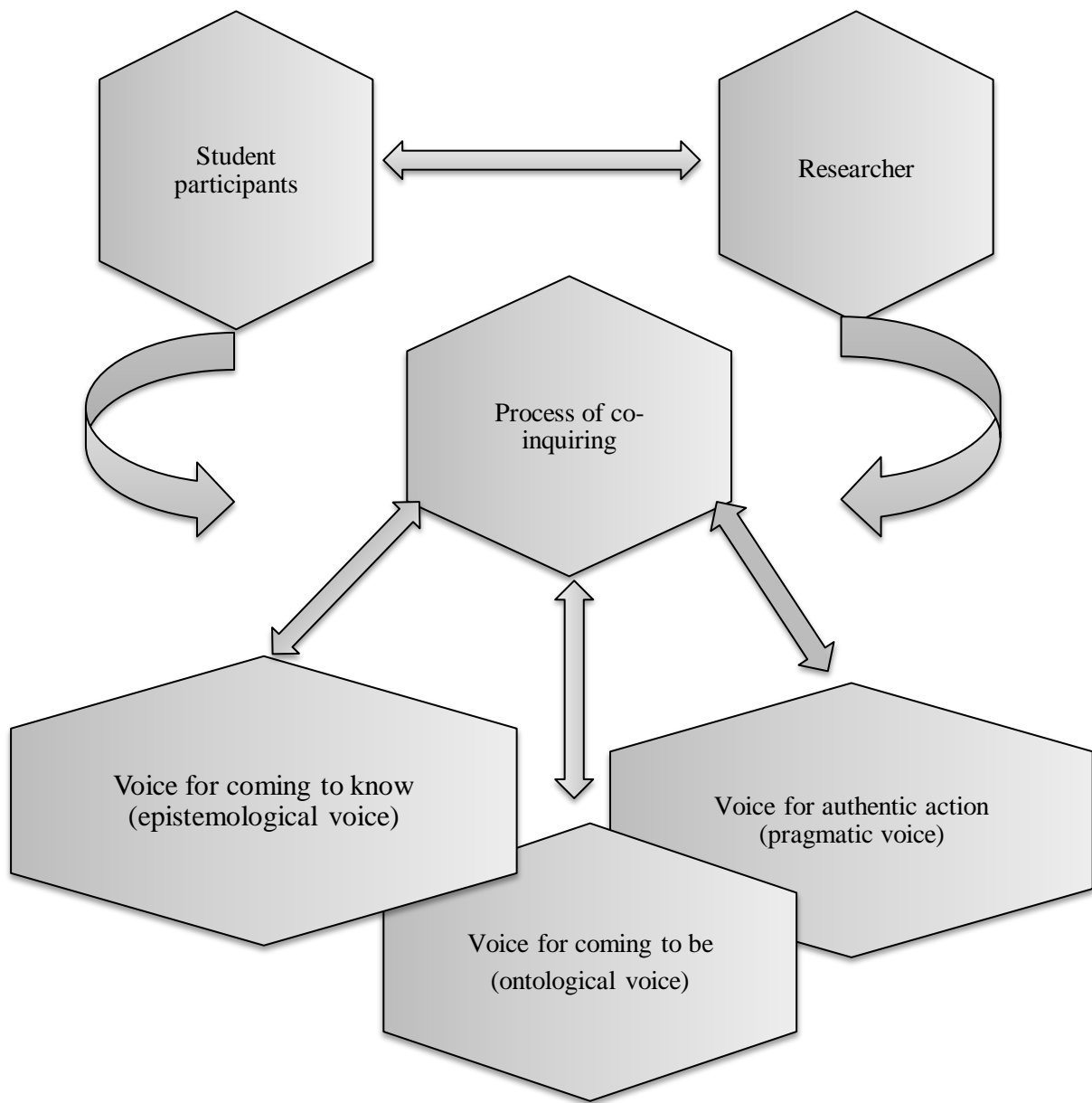
Nine students of a UK post-1992 university engaged in active interview conversations with nine students from a university in India and seven students from a university in Ireland using Skype. UK students also conducted face-to-face interview conversations with nine students from their own university in the UK. The interviews were recorded and analysed by the students using thematic approach under the guidance of the researcher.

The student engagement within the process of inquiring

The level of student engagement in research varies from one project to another. Within this study, the students from the UK university actively engaged in the research beginning from the planning of data collection, collecting data, analysis of data and the dissemination of the insights emerged from the research. This particular research was not part of their study courses and had no impact on their grades. The students volunteered to participate in the research and offered to spend their spare time to engage in this research. While the main researcher was directing and guiding the student participants throughout, the students were identified as co-inquirers from the beginning. Their main actions included planning interview conversations, contacting students from India, Ireland and UK, conducting interviews, analysing interviews and writing comparative stories about learning experiences across contexts, organising a final seminar and disseminating the insights from the research. The most significant difference from much academic research is the low profile of the researcher in the process of data collection, analysis and dissemination of research findings.

The post-research reflective conversations revealed that the process of participation in the research as co-inquirers provided students with authentic spaces for airing their voices on different aspects of the inquiry and thus increased meaningful and purposeful engagement with the research. Rather than acting as passive informants the students engaged with the process of inquiring with motivation which resulted in ‘coming to power’ of students to become active agents of change. It was revealed that student co-inquires have developed voices for coming to know their life worlds, voices for acting meaningfully to achieve targets and voices for being and becoming to move forward (see Batchelor, 2006). Figure 1 shows the different modes of student voice that emerged from the analysis of conversations:

Figure 1



Conceptualizing the different modes of student voice in co-inquiring (adapted from Batchelor, 2006).

Implications for policy and practice

The paper problematizes the current practices of academic research which employ and sometimes exploit students through superficial participation. Students are often given recognition as co-participants in funded research projects to address particular policy requirements of external funding sources, as a low cost data collection method or as a method of collecting data which otherwise will be illusive. It argues that academic research should engage students creating spaces for student voice that enable them to influence their own process of knowing, policy and practice in higher education.

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