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*Student Voice: Embracing Our Learners'
Knowledge in Teaching and Research*

Good morning and welcome to my Keynote address. Today I will be speaking about something I feel very passionately about, which is embracing our learners' voices in teaching and research.

First I would like to thank Linno Rhodes, who first contacted me about speaking at this event. The fact that somebody was interested in what I had to say was a very big deal. In fact, I said to my boss at the time, isn't it interesting that people outside my organisation think I have something valuable to say, yet nobody here listens to me at all?! I am very interested in this concept of voice, and as you'll find out, it's not just because I am a compulsive and chronic communicator, which often gets me into trouble. I also want to thank Rhonda Pelletier, who has liaised with me over many months while she was organising this conference. It was a conversation that I had with Rhonda that led me to focus on voice for this presentation.

Thinking of my own post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), it gets triggered when I feel I am not being listened to. When I am ignored or shouted down, I go into fight or flight mode. But then I realised that everybody I know reacts really badly when they feel people are not listening. It's equally upsetting when someone pretends to listen. Apparently, the managerial class are told these days that they need to listen, but then they come out with some line like "I have listened carefully and I hear you" but then go and do the opposite of what you have asked!

Obviously, truly listening goes further than just saying that you're listening.

Having a voice is a fundamental human need. Bessel van der Kolk, who wrote an important book about trauma and PTSD, called *The Body Keeps the Score*, wrote that "feeling listened to and understood changes our physiology."

It is very well known in the trauma literature that social support and a sense of belonging are essential for staving off PTSD, helping recovery, AND for learning. But, as van der Kolk wrote, "social support is not the same as merely being in the presence of others. The critical issue is reciprocity: being truly heard and seen by the people around us, feeling that we are held in someone else's mind and heart."

True belonging, then, is tied to feelings of visibility and the ability to have meaningful input into communities.

Conversely, not being listened to triggers the amygdala, the part of the brain that activates the fight or flight response in all of us. In fact, one of the top 5 causes of amygdala hijack in the workplace is the feeling of not being heard.

A lack of voice and autonomy also worsens mental health to the point of perpetuating chronic mental health.

Similarly, in the classroom, the feeling of being listened to or not makes a huge difference to students' sense of belonging, acceptance, safety, fairness and agency. It also adds to students' feeling that they are seen as whole people, and that they and their cultures are valued. It is no coincidence that these are key trauma-informed principles.

Take a look at some of these quotes, from both my own and others' research:

- "The teacher told us we weren't allowed to ask any questions."
- "He never asked my side of the story. Never asked me nothing."
- "They try to ask me as many questions about my culture, about me. And that makes me comfortable with them, to talk to them. They will not judge me because something or they judge me because my religion or anything else."
- "No voice, no vote"

So, what is voice? Obviously in one sense, voice is tied to language, and in Australia, our students need access to quality English education so that they can have more of a voice. Having a higher level of English proficiency means that our students will be more empowered to fight for their own rights, to speak for themselves.

Over my career, something that students have said to me again and again is, "I'm actually very intelligent and articulate in my own language, and I have a lot I want to express, so I'm frustrated because I can't say what I want to say in English."

On the screen now is a quote from a young woman named Merna Dolmay. Merna was an engineering student in northern Iraq when IS invaded her home city of Mosul, forcing her to flee with her family. She came to Australia as a refugee and I met her when she was a

presenter at a refugee conference. I was so impressed that I asked to collaborate on a book chapter, which will be published next year.

This is what she said about learning English:

“Learning language is very important for everybody. It is the key to every locked door.... English opens the doors to study at university and to find better work opportunities. This is what young, motivated people want to do. Learning the language makes you a stable and strong person. No language means you are like a deaf, blind person.”

She was speaking about her early struggle to learn academic English in Australia. The problem was not her own ability, but the attitude of the English language teaching system, which treated her in patronising ways and told her that university in Australia was beyond her. After her presentation, I stood up and said how closely her experiences echoed those of my own refugee-background students, who were disbelieved about their own learning experiences, needs, and ambitions. And then, in a jaw-dropping moment, a person from the system who had failed her, jumped in and said, “Oh, students don’t really know what they need. We know what we need!”

We literally stood there with our mouths hanging open.

Unfortunately, refugees, former refugees, and asylum seekers are often disbelieved. I’ve seen students called liars by management on more than one occasion. We are told that they are trying to put one over us, to take advantage.

As shocking as that is, refugees face mistrust and a culture of disbelief all the way through the asylum seeking process. Just think of the refugees on Manus Island and Nauru, or the Biloela family. They are routinely accused on exaggerating or falsifying their former and present trauma. If you do a search on the culture of disbelief surrounding the asylum process, you may be shocked to find the level of mistrust they are treated with.

I don’t know why it still surprises me. A couple of years ago, I was experiencing distress at the treatment of some refugee students that I taught, and I needed to talk to someone. The employee assistance counsellors were not available, so I went to speak to the university chaplain, even though I am not religious. I told him the story, and he was sympathetic, until I said “Well, our own government treats refugees in a shocking way. Look at those people on Manus Island.” At that point, the chaplain said, “Oh no, but those people are illegals!”

Disbelieving trauma and people's life experiences is a common way of silencing the voices of dispossessed and marginalised groups.

Similarly, other survivors of abuse are often silenced by casting them as unreliable witnesses. The literature of trauma is replete with metaphors and literal speech about having no voice and being silenced.

Think of sexual abuse survivors, and the child survivors of religious institutional sexual abuse. As children they were told to keep it secret and that nobody would believe them. Even years later some are not believed in a court of law, because "it couldn't happen". The same is often true of domestic violence survivors. I think this is partially because of something called the Just World Theory. This theory posits that many people cannot cognitively cope with the idea that the world is random and unfair, that terrible things happen to good people, and that everything does NOT happen for a reason. This is why people have to come up with a reason to blame the victim. Oh, "she asked for it," "they are sub-human," or "this could not be true".

Ironically, it is those with PTSD who are said to have a distorted worldview. Apparently it is more normal, a sign of good mental health, to see the world as essentially benign and just.

The mental patient is also seen as discreditable, and not to be trusted to know what they need in order to feel better. Ironically, one of the recurring themes in first person accounts of mental institutionalisation is that being consulted and being listened to helps alleviate mental distress, while being silenced makes it worse.

This is why, "for many survivors, telling their stories is an act of resistance against the perpetrators' attempts to silence them".

So what is voice, in a philosophical sense? "Voice is more than an academic short-hand for a person's point of view. It is an expression of individuality in the face of negative social stereotypes: an act of self-validation that can be examined as metaphor for protest."

In other words, having a voice is to be consulted, listened to, to have power over your own circumstances.

And when "*any* oppressed or excluded group's understandings are ignored or rejected, whether on the basis of sexuality, gender, race, age, culture, class, belief, or disability, they tend to be presented as inferior, deviant or defective."

Think about Australian Indigenous people, and indigenous peoples worldwide. Whenever I hear Australian Aboriginal activists and academics, they are usually saying the same thing: White Australia has failed them because they won't let them speak for themselves or act for themselves. This lack of power, the lack of listening, does enormous harm. It is no coincidence that they are seeking an Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

This “will mean listening to mob is compulsory and allowing Indigenous input into policy will be mandated”, said Megan Davis, UNSW Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous.

Similarly, the slogan of the Disability Movement is “Nothing about us without us”.

I have also used ‘Nothing About Us without Us’ as the name of my dissertation, because student voice, and the voice of trauma survivors, is lacking in this field.

When people, especially those from marginalised groups, are denied the opportunity to speak for themselves, it “tends to result in their being presented by others in **distorted, patronising, and pathologising ways.**”

For example, in one published article about trauma and adult English language learners, the author stated about a student: “He is extremely suspicious and untrusting of others, finding it difficult to reveal personal information about himself or allow anyone to get to know him. [He] may be suffering from what is termed by psychologists as refugee neurosis.”

Actually, he is exhibiting the normal signs of somebody experiencing post-traumatic stress. Trauma shatters worldview and trust, as well as a sense of safety and meaning.

The article continues that he “appears to lack any form of motivation to learn English, either instrumental or integrative.”

The key words here are *may be, appears to*. We can never assume or guess what is going on in our students' minds, and if a teacher is going around diagnosing students with ‘refugee neurosis’ instead of engaging them, of providing a safe learning space where they can trust and open up, she will never know what his true feelings are.

I have taught a number of students who seemed distant, distracted, and possibly not interested in class. When I got to know them better, there were all sorts of reasons for this, from having close family members in a warzone, to suicidal thoughts, being embarrassed about their English, and having cultural beliefs that they should not look the teacher in the eye, or that

they should look serious at all times in class. We never know what's going on if we assume pathology.

This is why it is so important to have student voice in research, but it is often still frowned upon in some academic circles.

I had to fight for the right to make my data collection all about student voice, and I changed universities because of it. I also had to fight to disclose my own identity as someone with PTSD in my research. It's funny because when I was about a year in, I was talking to an Indigenous academic named Sadie Heckenberg, and she told me she was doing her PhD at one particular university because, she said, she wanted to do it "my way". I was stunned by that. I said, "You mean you're allowed to do that?"

When I changed universities, my new PhD advisor did listen to me, and let me talk. She said I could do it the way I wanted to, and she gave me the tools to do that. She also said I could have anybody on my advisory team that I wanted, which was also a change from my previous experience. That is real trauma-informed teaching: listening to the student and allowing them to make choices. It changed my life.

Unfortunately, there is still the feeling amongst many educators, and I've heard it myself a lot, that students don't know what's best for them. This is obviously pure paternalism.

Very often, student voice is something to be measured, administered, registered, and controlled" or silenced "under an ideology of control and management".

However, as pointed out by John Smythe, an Australian academic who teaches and writes about critical pedagogy and student voice, "Students are very perceptive about what helps and hinders their learning". There is thus a need "to recognise and reposition students as authorities on and authors of their own educational experiences and representations of those experiences."

Echoing what I said earlier about mental health and the need to feel heard, a strong predictor of student success is "a sense of ownership because they feel "heard" by university leaders.

Similarly, insider voice in mental health research positions those with lived experience as having something of value to say. In this paradigm, the researcher is not the sole expert. They have academic knowledge, but experiential knowledge cannot be dismissed.

So too, in research with refugees, refugees of course are the experts in their own experience. As we have seen, refugees are often silenced, disbelieved, or not given space to talk about their lives. A couple of years ago I got a phonecall from the media office where I worked. They needed someone to speak about the experience of refugees studying at my university. I said, “do you know who REALLY knows about refugee students? REFUGEE STUDENTS! “Oh no”, I was told, they are not on the list of accepted experts.”

So how can we increase the use of voice of our students and especially our marginalised students, in research?

Advocacy research means not speaking for participants, but giving them the spaces and opportunities to speak for themselves. This can mean involving research participants as co-authors rather than just data sources, and as co-designers of a study. Participants can also exercise their voice in research by having the right to check and edit quotes attributed to them, withdraw from research, and to take the research in directions that were not initially planned by the researcher.

I saw an interesting example of this recently in a journal article about people with a traumatic brain injury. Initially the research was supposed to be about something else, but ended up being about the qualities in healthcare practitioners. And in this field of work, like in many others, many professionals believe that clients know nothing about what constitutes good practice, good care. But they found that the attitude and the inclusion by practitioners were really important. You can see by the title, one of the participants had tears in his eyes, because of the feeling of finally been understood.

Sadly, it's a similar situation with TESOL. Student voice is absent from most ESL teaching books, which seem to be dominated by information gleaned by every other kind of research.

When we do interview ESL students about what matters in teaching, they constantly refer to elements like caring and kindness, respect, treating English language learners like *learners*, instead of deficient native speakers or just ignorant people, sharing and respecting cultures, and of course, being able to talk. This refers to 2 aspects: and being provided the linguistic tools to express themselves in English, and interaction with the teacher and other students as part of the learning process.

But it's not just ESL students who want these things. Just last week I saw a Linked In post by a mother whose 18 year-old had just started university and dropped out because he was

muted in on-line classes, not allowed to interact, and told that he and his current classmates were much less intelligent than the previous cohort.

And a survey from a UK uni in 2018 found that students just want lecturers to “treat them and talk to them as though they are a person”.

Imagine what educational institutions could learn about good teaching if they listened more to what students value!

Privileging student voice in the language learning classroom obviously has a lot of benefits too. Dialogic teaching is a central tenet of critical pedagogy. Also, the lower the teacher talk time, the more students get to develop and practise their English. When students get to speak about something they know – and every language learning syllabus should relate to the students’ own knowledge and experiences – they get to share expert status with the teacher. They can see themselves and each other as “people of knowledge”, rather than empty vessels waiting to be filled.

As I’m sure you know, language teachers who talk too much or don’t allow students to talk are deeply disliked. It also means that the students are not really going to learn how to use the language, and end up bored and disengaged.

This of course is not limited to mean or disciplinarian teachers. I once dropped out of an Italian course run by an extremely nice woman who could speak English and Italian equally well, but we hardly got the chance to try out Italian words and phrases because she was too busy EXPLAINING them to us.

From my research, in casual conversation with language students and in my own experience, I’ve found that when students are not allowed to speak, they feel that their teacher does not value them or care what they have to say. They also feel that they are not valued as adults with knowledge, experience, or the ability, however rudimentary, to express themselves.

The opposite is also true. Let me end today with a quote from one of my PhD participants. They were talking about how they felt in class when teachers and classmates gave him the space to talk, and were curious enough to ask:

“They try to ask me as many questions about my culture, about me. And that makes me comfortable with them, to talk to them. They will not judge me because of my religion or anything else. And that makes me feel accepted.”

Thank you.

Victoria Wilson for VALBEC