

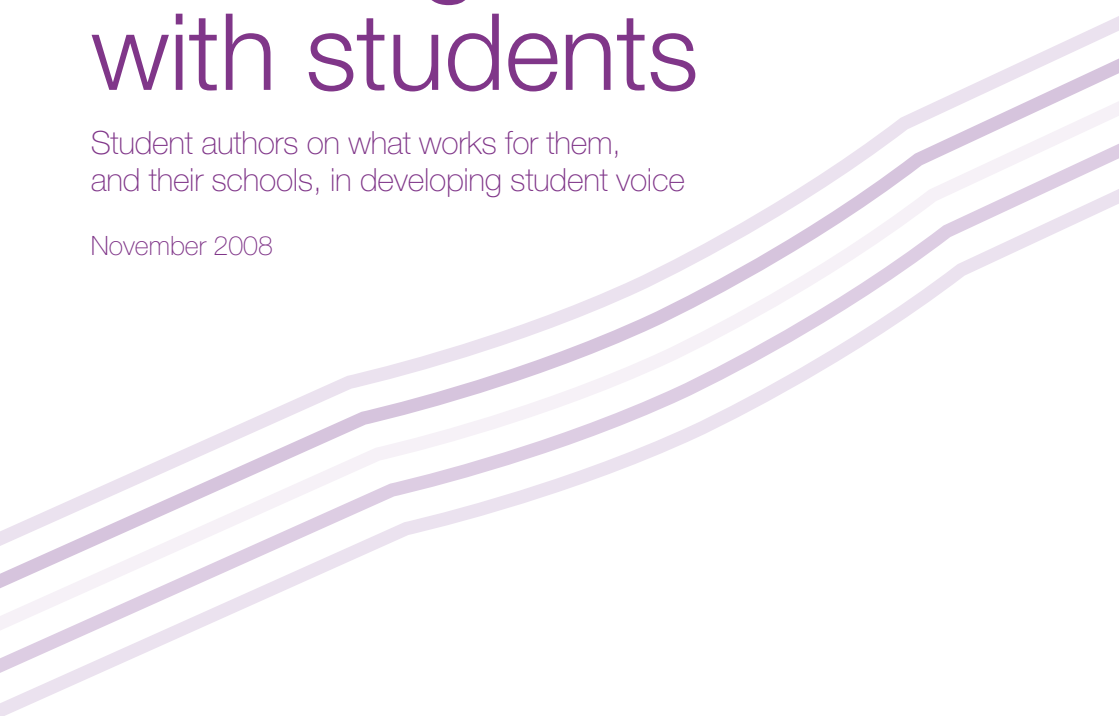


Specialist Schools
and Academies Trust
THE SCHOOLS NETWORK™

Learning with students

Student authors on what works for them,
and their schools, in developing student voice

November 2008



Learning with students

November 2008

Authors

Students from 10 schools (see annex); introduction by Laura Lindsay, Student Consultant, SSAT, and Gill Mullis, Student Voice Coordinator, SSAT.

Editor

Peter Chambers

Mission of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust

The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust works to give practical support to the transformation of secondary education in England by building and enabling a world-class network of innovative, high performing secondary schools in partnership with business and the wider community.

THIS PUBLICATION

Audience

Educational practitioners at all levels and students developing student voice initiatives in schools

Aims

To explore innovative student voice practice through students' own reports; to recognise students as informed and legitimate authors

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Charity no. 296729. Registered in England. Company no. 2124695.

Printed by Impact Print Solutions. ISBN 978-1-906524-33-3

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Foreword

The SSAT started its work with schools on personalising learning through a series of conferences in partnership with ASCL in October 2004. The first two conferences in this series focussed on the role that student voice and assessment for learning could play in meeting more needs of more students more fully than before.

These two conferences were attended by over 500 school leaders and teachers. It was apparent that many delegates were very excited by the potential that student voice and assessment for learning could play in personalising learning for all students. Delegates were also inspired by the students who were involved in the school-led showcases. While a good deal of student voice work was taking place in schools at this time, it was quite a challenge for the SSAT regional networks to suggest more than a handful of schools who felt confident to share their student voice work on a national platform.

In January 2006, at the end of this series of conferences, a survey of 600 delegates indicated that student voice was considered by school leaders to be the gateway which had the greatest potential to personalise learning.

Building on this initial interest, the SSAT set up regional student voice steering groups to work alongside the SSAT regional headteacher steering groups. These student led groups have organised a wide range of successful student voice events. The regional student voice groups have also acted as a conduit to channel student opinion from the regions to central government. For example, in November 2007 the student steering groups, facilitated by the SSAT student consultants, produced a response to the DCSF's Time to Talk consultative process.

The growth in student voice work in schools over the last four years can arguably be described as a classroom revolution (see *Leading system redesign 3*). As the quantity and quality of student voice work in schools has grown rapidly the SSAT has visited a large number of schools to identify and support good practice. Much of this work has been showcased, increasingly by students, at SSAT regional and national events. The SSAT's personalising learning team has also produced two training packs to support the implementation of student voice work in schools following events and conferences.

A significant move for the SSAT's personalising learning team was to appoint two student consultants from September 2007 who had experience of leading student voice activities in their schools. The student consultants regularly lead training sessions in schools for students and staff and support the programme of conferences, publications and training packs offered to schools.

To reflect the high quality and wide range of student voice work now going on in schools, over 500 students from over 50 schools were involved in the SSAT national conferences in 2007 and 2008. The students were actively involved in both conferences in a range of roles including leading showcases, event management, interviewing delegates and some impressive performances on the main stage and around the conference venue.

Learning with students aims to capture the confidence with which so many students can now articulate the impressive student voice work that they are leading in partnership with staff in their schools. In April 2008 students from all SSAT affiliated schools were invited to submit student authored case studies of student voice work in which they had been involved. It is a testimony to the scale and quality of student voice work going on in so many schools that the SSAT received over 120 submissions from students.

In addition to the student voice work described by the students in this pamphlet and *Leading system redesign 3* students and staff can access a wider range of student voice work and support materials at www.schoolsnetwork.org.uk

Finally, if you are a student or teacher and you think that the SSAT networks could learn from the student voice work you are developing in your school please contact us: plteam@ssatrust.org.uk

Kai Vacher

Head of personalising learning

1 Introduction

‘This unique opportunity demonstrated how much respect the teachers and senior staff had for the views and ability of the students. It also empowered us to be able to initiate change and place students in a pivotal role at the forefront of education... Everyone from year 7 up has become aware of just how important student leadership is to their future and how their voice (both individually and collectively) could help to shape their future.’

Olivia Brazier and Caitlin Ferguson

This comment from Brazier and Ferguson (see chapter 3) highlights the aims and intended values of this publication; students are the authors of all ten articles, directly representing their work on a range of student voice initiatives rather than having others write for them.

Over 100 articles were submitted by students from SSAT affiliated schools in response to an invitation to create a publication which not only explores innovative student voice practice but which recognises students as informed and legitimate authors.

In this introduction we highlight features of student voice work in each article that we found significant and exciting and which contributed to their selection for publication; our intention is not to intrude upon the students’ own work which follows.

Matt's article on student leadership at St Georges illustrates how new structures are emerging to meet the needs of the school, with students creating groups in response to specific issues and these groups existing for as long as they are required. Voluntary membership is a strategy used to widen participation. Student leaders from different groups also manage collaboration across projects, drawing on each others' skills. What is notable is student engagement with the idea of personalising learning. Matt also identifies how the move to a mini school structure may further support student participation.

In explaining The Voyager School's approach to student leadership, Caitlin and Olivia outline a values-led approach as a means of embedding student voice in a new school. Students' own choice of new terms, such as 'SEG' and their choice of research topics, show students identifying ways forward and establishing a new vocabulary to represent their work. Other innovative developments include the use of a partnership agreement, the involvement of the wider community from the beginning, and the proposed introduction of a student leadership institution and library.

In 'Swavesey offers more!', Emma acknowledges how increased student participation contributes to a real sense of community, the title of the article representing how student voice has helped develop skills for life. The move to vertical tutoring at Swavesey Village College was taken as the opportunity to evaluate leadership opportunities for students. The resulting structure is clear, shared and embedded in the new house system. It is also made visible and given status through the introduction of black polo shirts for specific leadership positions and the provision of offsite training.

The use of symbol writer, switches and traffic lights to involve students in staff interviews, are strategies that have been developed at Sir Charles Parsons School to create a more inclusive model of student participation. The use of a range of communication aids has enabled students with severe and profound and multiple learning difficulties to express preferences, put forward questions that matter to them and influence their experience of school. Such transferable strategies demonstrate how students who experience barriers to learning can be included in student voice initiatives.

The students as observers group at Verulam School started small with joint training for staff and student volunteers. This enabled the combined teacher-student team to establish understanding and trust, the beginnings of their partnership model. Angus and Patrick's representation of both students' and teachers' views and experiences, further demonstrates this partnership. An example of students and teachers moving forward together is the learning that takes place from sharing perspectives.

As a year 8 student, Robert writes confidently about student lesson observations, offering an evaluation of the collaborative model developed at Towers School. An interesting feature of the project is Tower's 'observe while you learn' approach. Regular monthly meetings of the staff and student working party, the provision of pre-meeting information and a space to meet, help facilitate the project. The opportunity for students to network directly with another school was a factor in the development of the initiative.

Stokesley School's learning conference is an innovative way of collating research from the student body, whilst also developing student leadership skills through the organisation of the day. It is notable that the students set the questions for the conference, directing the research agenda of the school. Students take on the role of lead learners, to both student and staff audiences. Learning conversations take place as students share their vision for learning with staff, parents, governors and mixed age group research teams. Again we see the acknowledgement of a greater sense of community once age barriers have been removed.

The Honywood School students as researchers model recognises that students have the potential to help solve problems and share in school improvement, not necessarily leading initially. The project shows students' ability to undertake research, organise learning conferences and network with other schools, in this case inviting another school to join them in a conference to explore boys' underachievement in writing. Haydn and Tommy show how student voice may involve collaborative student-teacher exploration of a learning issue.

Natalie, Dan and Callum's case study reinforces the idea of students as lead learners. At Swayne Park School Year 7 e-mentors use new technologies to share their knowledge of transition and apply their training in the safe use of the internet in order to answer emails responsibly. Their maturity and professionalism is acknowledged through their involvement in training new mentors, creating a sustainable model. The scheme is made more personal through e-mentor visits to the primary school they attended.

Ringwood's case study illustrates co-construction between students and teachers from four schools, through off site learning. Fiona and Jenny explain how students involved in the project are themselves learning about culture, visiting different communities and then sharing their knowledge with teachers in the development of cross curricular materials for younger students. New technologies support the project.

We would invite you, in reading the students' articles, to consider what makes each project distinct and what connects them and to consider which factors and which solutions might be applicable in your own school.

Laura Lindsay, Student Consultant, SSAT

Gill Mullis, Student Voice Coordinator, SSAT

2 Engaging students and developing student leadership

Matt Love (year 12), Saint George's Church of England School, Gravesend, Kent

For many years Saint George's Church of England School in Gravesend, like many other schools in England, has had student voice, a system of student participation. This system included the school council, which worked through form representation, a head boy and head girl and other positions of responsibility, with one body for all students.

With personalising learning and the nine gateways, student voice became more important in encouraging the school to look at the roles students were playing. We needed to change the direction away from figureheads and appointed positions, post 16 being different/separate from the rest of the school and the same old discussions of the toilets and the dinner queue by the school council. It was also necessary to get more kids involved and have lots of different activities. Students, staff and governors also felt the need to have students elect their representative, not simply to appoint a head boy and head girl. As our headteacher says, 'Do we have a male headteacher and a female headteacher? Do we have a female and male Prime Minister?'

In response to the needs of user-led education where roles are blurring and responsibilities are overlapping, as written by David Hargreaves, we decided to get rid of the previous system and create student improvement groups (SIGs). Each group is led by a student who feels the school needs improvement; these people are known as student leaders. The student leaders take on roles to communicate and coordinate with each other depending on their focus, be it a project for the whole group or just for one section.

In the first month of the student improvement groups being active in the school they established a budget of £800 to use for any projects; although this was small in comparison to most budgets in a school, it was better than nothing and more than enough for any projects that were underway. This also helped a lot when the groups were coming up with ideas for improvements and events, because there was a sense that the financing was there to get the ideas off the ground without having to approach the headteacher too early in the process.

Students from across the school can volunteer to become student leaders and to create focus groups. These groups can change, they can be started in response to an issue or they may exist for only a short while. The aim is to avoid a boring school council where the same issues are discussed by the same students. Student leaders take on roles to communicate and coordinate with a wider group of students from across the school. For example, the student leader of Charity worked with the student leader of Press and Community to advertise the staff talent show and awareness of its benefactor, Demelza House.

The leader of each school improvement group met the school's student voice coordinator and received initial leadership training and bi-weekly guidance. The groups created in the first term were: Charity – to raise awareness and funds for charities; Press and Community – to contact local press and to cover school and community events; Eco Warriors – to work on developing a more sustainable school; Technology and Communication – to co-ordinate use of the hall and run the technological needs of events in the school; Healthy Schools – to coach the year 7 football team and encourage young people to live a healthier lifestyle; Pupil Support – to support vulnerable students; Mentoring – as part of our role of hub school for mentoring and coaching to give help and support to reduce antisocial behaviour and exclusions; Anti-Racism – to promote cultural awareness; Student Researchers – to participate in improving teaching and learning; the Behaviour Council – to deal with poor behaviour; and finally, Student Voice – to liaise with students and staff and deal with daily concerns.

Most of the groups have successfully completed their initial projects. It helped a lot where leaders already had ideas and were doing something that they were interested in rather than something that had been handed to them to do. It may be fair to say that the staff had underestimated the students' enthusiasm for the student improvement group.

Student leaders had the opportunity to run for head student leader in an election. There was a website where students could vote, run by the Technology SIG, and the students who chose to run gave speeches to the student body. The elected student was made headteacher for the day and has subsequently taken on the traditional responsibilities of the head boy/head girl. New student leaders are already applying for posts in the student leadership group for next year, and some current student leaders might choose to let someone else take over while they focus on year 13, while others are ready to continue.

On the whole the concept of a student leadership group rather than a student council seemed to work better for Saint George's and the student leaders enjoyed what they were doing and had fun with it. There is no doubt that there will be more interesting ideas coming from the group next year.

There have been hiccups along the way. Some students found balancing A-levels with their activities challenging, younger leaders felt the pressure of initiating changes from the bottom up, some students lost enthusiasm, and others did not have the skills to lead a group effectively. Through troubleshooting, the student voice coordinator is working on a programme to develop leadership in students and to create a more effective way of teaching project management to the leaders. She asked potential leaders to apply for positions and to go through an interview process to encourage the most motivated leaders. Each student who becomes engaged and participates in their education is a success for our school.

Next year things will change a bit – with our school being divided into mini-schools we will have student leaders throughout the year groups, but all will work together to foster a sense of community. Each mini-school will have a leadership group with staff and student leaders working together. Two student leaders will be able to become governors. There will also be more ongoing training to develop the leadership skills of all students involved to ensure the school can further empower and engage students.

Questions

1. What structures exist in your school to enable students to lead initiatives?
2. In what ways do you think the development of student leadership can help meet more needs, of more students, more of the time?

3 Developing a student leadership model: for students, by students

Olivia Brazier (year 12 member of student executive group) and Caitlin Ferguson (year 12 member of student executive group and associate governor), The Voyager School, Peterborough, Cambridgeshire

The Voyager School is a large mixed comprehensive school in Peterborough, which opened in September 2007 with the amalgamation of two closing schools. One of the unique features of our school is how it has introduced student leadership. We recognise that every student should have the opportunity to be an active citizen in our school and in our wider community. As young people we know that our society is always changing and one of our aims was to create a student leadership model that equips young people with the skills to be confident and informed citizens of the future.

How can we achieve this aim?

We acknowledge that every student has a key role to play in developing the school community and in improving the quality of learning across the school. As part of our commitment, the student executive group (SEG) set out to create opportunities that develop core values and responsibility among the student body. It encourages students to question and explore and to develop their ability to make decisions on issues that matter to them and the whole Voyager community.

The SEG met to share ideas and creative thoughts on how to achieve this aim. We drew on our own experiences and focused on the perceptions students coming to our new school had shared with us on their understanding of student leadership. This had been achieved through a questionnaire. A large sample of students from both schools completed questions to explore current student voice activities – we learnt early on that many students felt their voice was never really heard.

The SEG gathered information and met students, people in local business and members of the temporary governing body to compile an action plan that captured what we needed to achieve. From discussions we created a student leadership model. This was based on a clear understanding of the student leadership vision and values we had developed. Extra meetings took place to fully understand the model; to appreciate that we were introducing something that would evolve over time. We needed agreement and commitment from everyone; at times this was not easy. However, we had started to get better at working towards a compromise and although we all came with different experiences, we all shared a common vision.

In order to develop the model, SEG worked with the deputy head of The Voyager School and a university researcher. By working together, we were able to identify areas to create a strategic plan. It was at this time that we started to see ourselves as ‘partners’ at The Voyager School. However, we believed that our model could not be developed if we did not have the full commitment of the headteacher and the senior leadership team, so we met to share our proposal. This meeting was the turning point in how we moved forward in developing the model.

Innovation in action – our student leadership partnership agreement

The agreement can be used by both parties to ensure we meet the needs of our students and the leadership programme. The main objectives of the partnership are:

- Distribute leadership processes including students as educational leaders
- Develop a leadership development pathway to prepare student leaders to assume leadership positions in the school and the community
- Demonstrate commitment to student participation in decision making at the school
- Involve students as ‘school improvement partners’ to make suggestions for the improvement of practices in schools, based on student research

By signing the partnership agreement both parties agreed to abide by the key pillars of the student leadership model. By gaining responsibility and ability to lead others we have learnt that successes come from failures and because of this we are able to appreciate everything that we have achieved.

In order to create the best structure possible we made sure that each level (all equally crucial to the overall model) was created, considered and captured perfectly in our leadership model. We wanted to choose two representatives from each tutor group in every year to reinforce our initial idea that everyone’s voice is valued and encouraged. These student leaders were to be brought together via each year’s forum and to do this we were all required to show commitment and the ability to share our skills and knowledge with those who would potentially inherit and benefit from the leadership ‘platform’.

Student leadership skills development

In order to develop the skills of student leaders at The Voyager School, our model would include a leadership institute. This would guide students through the different skills and qualities required to be a successful student leader at The Voyager School. The course will be developed 'for the students, by the students' to ensure it meets all demands. Once the skills have been developed, students get an opportunity to practice these skills through school, community and business leadership activities (such as work experience). This section aims to extend partnerships with external organisations that can support schools' and students' future development. The final stage is the leadership library, used to store information on all courses that have been created for student leadership, as well as testimonials from students who have participated in the courses. It is hoped that this will encourage future students to take part and for student leadership at The Voyager School to develop further.

Students as researchers

SEG decided on the key areas that students should gain from researching. We felt that in order for students to develop their student leadership skills they should be trained as researchers within the school. By doing this, the students will have a say in school improvements and areas that affect them as students. Therefore the main aim is for the students and staff to gain cohesion to improve the school for students at present and in the future.

Building capacity – one step further

Elections took place for the role of two associate governors who would represent the student leaders on the governing body. This unique opportunity demonstrated how much respect the teachers and senior staff had for the views and ability of the students. It also empowered us to be able to initiate change and place students in a pivotal role at the forefront of education. Our role as student educational leaders gave us confidence to stride forward and create a future legacy for all students at The Voyager School.

The Voyager School has faced lots of challenges in its first year, what school hasn't? What makes our school so different is the way that we have dealt with them. We have faced challenges head on especially with the integration of all the students. Our diverse mix of talents means that we will be able to continue our success. Although we are a small core group of nine students, we have made big differences to the school, helping bring about change and, most importantly, having the student voice not just heard but listened to and acted upon. Everyone from year 7 up has become aware of just how important student leadership is to their future and how their voice (both individually and collectively) can help to shape their future.

Questions

1. How might you create more opportunities for student leadership in your school?
2. How important is it for students to be involved in the design and creation of new models of student leadership?

4 Swavesey offers more: learning to lead

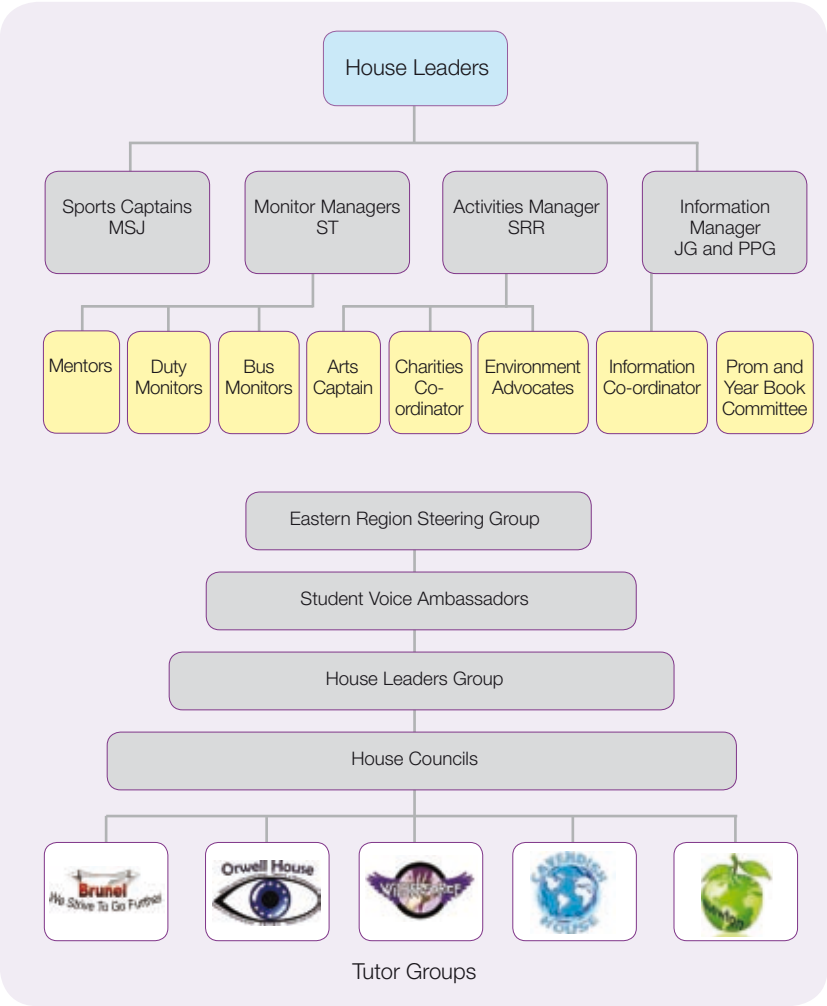
Emma Dobson (year 11), School Ambassador 2008, Swavesey Village College, Swavesey, Cambridgeshire

Swavesey Village College (SVC) offers more than just academic achievement. Over the past three years SVC has developed a unique leadership system, formed alongside the introduction of vertical tutoring. This has helped SVC develop not only academically but socially to become a rounded community; becoming more than and extending beyond the constraints of a purely academic school.

Quotation from a current student leader: 'SVC is no longer just a school which educates people to pass exams. It does that but goes way beyond, teaching people life skills which will help them in some respects more than a sheet with GCSE grades. I am going away from SVC with a lot more than I expected to, in a good way. I have grown in confidence quite a lot! I have experience of talking to large numbers of people and have experienced managing groups and implementing new ideas, all these skills I never thought I would acquire by attending SVC.'

Setting up new leadership opportunities coincided with the introduction of vertical tutoring; a process met sceptically by many students and staff. Overcoming scepticism, vertical tutoring has become the basis for many of the positive developments that are still occurring today; such as leadership positions.

The two diagrams represent the new leadership structure and show all the positions which have been created in alignment with the vertical tutoring system. The leadership structure at the lowest level begins with minor but important leadership opportunities, such as mentors, duty monitors and coordinators. These students feed up to the next level consisting of sports captains, monitor managers, activities managers and information managers. These four roles will be the first level to receive a black polo shirt showing their position, instead of our standard sky blue polo shirt. These four roles then feed into house leaders who collate, manage and lead all the positions below.



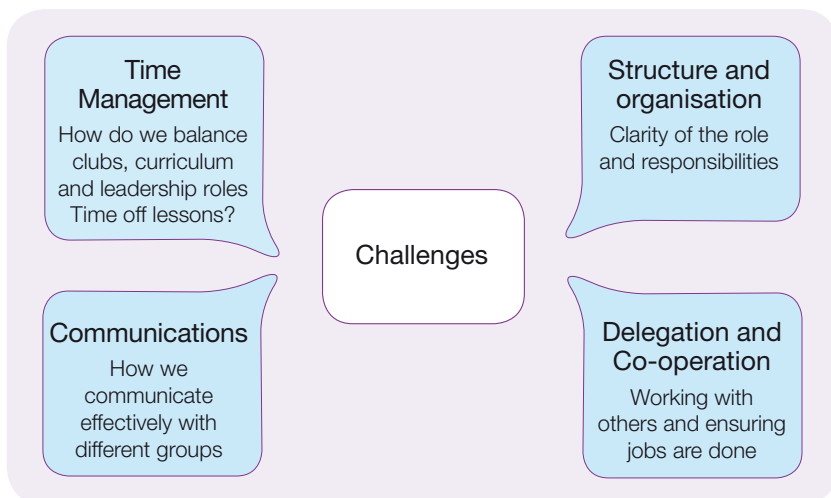
House leaders also receive black polo shirts. The house leaders then feed ideas to the student voice ambassadors who work inside and outside school, promoting the voice of students and running and organising particular tasks within school. Most importantly the ambassadors represent the school on the SSAT Eastern region student voice steering group. As many of the positions are new the leadership structure and positions are continuously being improved and developed. The ambassadors have implemented two main ideas over their year in office to help improve the school. These are teacher observation by students, which involves student feedback on lessons; and bench marking visits to other schools to evaluate methods which might be beneficial to our school, basically nicking ideas!

Many of the successes derived from the leadership positions have affected all aspects of college life at SVC. Increased opportunities from their experience as leaders have given students confidence and life skills. Students have become more rounded and aware of situations which could occur after their life at SVC. In some respects this development will be as beneficial and influential in students' future life as anything else they gain from SVC, such as academic achievement.

Although the school has benefited widely from the introduction of student leadership, the leadership programme is an evolving process. At the end of their year in office students were asked to reflect on and evaluate what they had achieved and to rewrite and improve their job descriptions, in order to add what they have achieved and to develop the position for the future. Not all of the positions and ideas have worked, so the identification of what works well and what does not has led to some of the roles being altered, completely changed, or replaced.

Evaluating areas of improvement was a valuable process to help improve the leadership situation for the future. The process of evaluating progress to date was initiated via the school's connection with the Eastern Leadership Centre (ELC), which usually trains senior members of staff. However although it is important to look at the negative aspects we also evaluated what had gone well and what we would keep in place next year.

The diagram shows the current problems with our leadership programme as identified by a small group of senior students in leadership positions and a lower school student, prior to going to the ELC for our planning meeting. As these were problems that were discussed as areas needing improvement, our aim was to find solutions. Through the training of our younger students who will be taking over our leadership positions, we hope to be able to give guidance on overcoming or helping find solutions for these situations.



We are liaising with the ELC to develop a new student leadership training programme. The process of training student leaders is new to both them and our school, but an ideal professional opportunity to improve the training of our student leaders. Next year's student leaders will attend a training day to receive advice for dealing with situations using real-life problematic situations experienced by our current leaders, which they will role-play and aim to resolve. They will also address important questions to better their leadership. The programme for the day will be based on the outline below:

- Similar minds – what type of leader are you?
- What are the ABCs of leadership?
- What makes a good leader?
- Time management activity
- Solving real life leadership challenges

From the reflection of our current leadership positions and what we have achieved, some important queries have arisen. These questions include whether the right age group is being given leadership opportunities, and whether they should be given to the younger students as they do not have important exams.

Although our leadership programme is currently undergoing improvements and changes, the experience of leadership has affected many of our current leaders. I personally have gained far more than I ever expected to have done from SVC in terms of life experience and life skills. SVC offers more than academic achievement, it offers opportunities for personal development and opportunities to experience leadership which leads to acquiring some of the most valuable and important skills in life.

From my time at SVC there is one important factor I have learnt which I deem as very important regarding leadership and life: a position is not what it is written down to be, it is what you make it.

Questions

1. What 'life skills' do you consider are promoted by student leadership?
2. How do you develop leadership skills in your school?
3. Compare the advantages and disadvantages of using:
 - (a) external organisations
 - (b) staff in your school
 - (c) studentsto deliver training.

5 Students as interviewers

Samina Hussain (year 11), Amber Cushing (year 11), Billy Davis (year 10), Jade Wearmouth (year 8), and Jake Gilbert (year 7), Sir Charles Parsons School, Newcastle, Tyne and Wear

Sir Charles Parsons School is a secondary school for students aged 11–19 with severe and profound and multiple learning difficulties. Student voice is a big part of the whole ethos of our school.

One of the many ways we have used student voice has been involving students in the process of interviewing potential new staff.

Interviews were broken down into four parts:

- Informal chat with staff
- Student interview
- Observed classroom activity
- Formal interview

Students from all key stages took part, reflecting the range of needs and abilities throughout the school.

Everyone involved in the process – students, staff and interviewees – felt it was a positive experience and an excellent way of gaining students' views and opinions. Student interviews are now part of all interviews for new staff.

At Sir Charles Parsons School we use a range of strategies to enable everyone to communicate clearly. The students asked for some support from staff to produce the introduction to this article, explaining the interview process. The rest of the article is written in the students' own words using a range of communication aids, such as symbol writer.

Samina and Amber

We thought of our own questions, things that we would like to find out about new staff. We used symbols to write our questions and some students used a switch. We sat in a circle to interview and saved a seat for the new staff member.

To vote we used traffic lights, if we really liked someone we gave them green, orange was if we were not sure and red was for if we didn't want them. It was good because we knew Mr Sharing (the headteacher) wouldn't give a job to people who we gave a red to. We asked questions like 'If they would go in the pool with us during swimming lessons', 'Could they sign' and 'what would they do if they couldn't understand a student with a speech problem.' After that we could ask anything we wanted, we could be quite nosey!!

We asked some new staff what they thought about the students interviewing; this is what they said:

'I thought it was excellent, important to involve the student in the interview process.'

'Having the students interview gave them an insight into how we interacted with them, it's a really good idea.'

Our headteacher said, 'I was very impressed with the quality of the students' questions. They agreed questions which were important to them and which would help give a real insight into the suitability of candidates to work at the school. For one set of interviews, for example, the students asked how the candidate would help a student who was upset or angry calm down. In another set of interviews for learning support assistants, they asked how the candidate would help a student who needed help in the bathroom to feel comfortable.

'I have also been impressed by the decision the students have made about the candidates. There have been a small number of occasions when the students have given a 'red' card to a candidate. They have always given clear and valid reasons for doing so. One of the most interesting aspects of this initiative has been the similarity of the views expressed by the students to those of the formal interview panel.

'I value the students' judgements and I am convinced they have a very important role to play in the staff selection process.'





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Questions

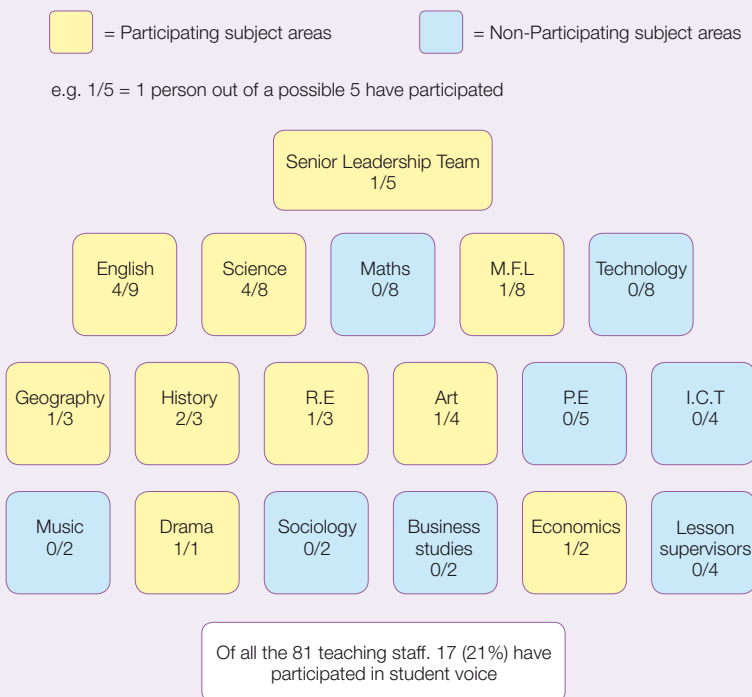
1. What strategies do you have in place to involve all students in decision-making in your school?
2. How would you assess your school's progress in increasing the participation of students with special educational needs?

6 Student voice at Verulam School: participation in lesson observation and feedback

Angus Keeley and Patrick Walker (year 9), Verulam School, St Albans, Hertfordshire

A student voice initiative, where trained students observe lessons and feed back their views to teachers, was introduced at Verulam School for Boys in the summer of 2005. Members of the students' school council were identified and recruited to participate in the initiative. A group of 24 students and eight teachers formed the 2006–7 cohort. In an attempt to spread participation, students who were not members of the school council were nominated by their form teachers to be involved in the 2007–8 cohort. In total nine teachers participated across four main subject areas: science, English, RS and geography. It should be stated that teacher and student participation is totally voluntary with the numbers being kept deliberately small. The school's aim is for the number of participants to grow as the benefits of participation become known, logistics considered and concerns addressed. Figure 1 illustrates the number of teachers from departments that have participated in student voice since its introduction at the school.

Figure 1. Departments and teachers participating in student voice since its introduction



Training

All teachers and students who take part in the initiative must participate in a joint training session. This has proven to be a vital step in developing trust and understanding between students and teachers, and has established the boundaries within which lesson observations take place. Through the use of simple games and activities teachers and students build working relationships with an understanding that confidentiality is essential. The benefit of the training session is illustrated by one teacher's comment: 'It was reassuring that students understood what the project was about, that they knew how to give feedback. All of us came to realise that our participation was a strength not a weakness. We also came to understand the bigger picture and what it meant for teachers, students as individuals and the school.'

A student also expressed his view: 'The training meant I realised it was more than saying lessons were 'good' or 'bad'. I learnt how to approach observing and speaking to teachers and I became aware of teaching methods, whether they were slapdash or well organised, and the deeper meaning behind lessons.'

In the Spring term of 2008 the views of students, participating and non-participating teachers and the deputy head responsible for the introduction of student voice were investigated by use of a semi-structured questionnaire.

The deputy head's perspective

The deputy head responsible for the initiative felt teachers would gain from having this previously untapped input from students. Teachers opting into the initiative on a voluntary basis are by their very nature open minded people. She felt that teacher-student relationships would benefit and students would be more involved in 'improving the learning of all students and the techniques used by their teachers.' They would be recognised as young people whose views counted and that students should be 'taking an active role in their own learning rather than being passive participants.' Eventually our deputy head would like to see students involved in a much wider range of school based issues such as carrying out the annual pupil opinion survey by making up the questions, interviewing students, collating the data and presenting findings to students, teachers, parents and governors. During 2008 for instance students were being consulted on their views about homework.

Teachers' and students' views

All teachers interviewed agreed that participation must be on a voluntary basis; even having opted into student voice some still had slight reservations. One stated for instance that 'some teachers probably feel that it's not a student's place to comment on their performance, some would feel scared of being criticised by a junior.' Another felt teachers' participation was dependent on 'the confidence of the teacher and level of responsibility they hold' and went on to say that 'many teachers underestimate our students and what they have to offer.' Another teacher was 'concerned that students would think it was 'weak' teachers they were observing.' Participating teachers agreed 'you have to be confident to expose yourself to students in this way, some teachers for instance bitterly complained when the new classroom doors with windows were installed.'

The students' views on voluntary or mandatory participation were mixed. While a post 16 student believed 'all teachers have something to gain from listening to us, we should be doing this more frequently than we are at present', a year 9 boy stated 'teachers should only be involved if they want to listen to us. It is good for us to know that what we feed back is useful otherwise they wouldn't participate.'

Although the deputy head would like all new staff to participate in student voice, there was some resistance to this. Two non-participants in their NQT year both stated that they had experienced many lesson observations during their graduate teacher programme year. One teacher stated, 'I'd had enough of being observed 24/7 during GTP and wanted to be free from that so I could grow; find my own feet and style of teaching.' Indeed there was a feeling of observation fatigue among some newer colleagues to the profession. One non-participating teacher thought there should be a hierarchical nature to involvement: 'Before asking all to be involved those in positions of responsibility like advanced skills teachers, heads of department and faculty, and senior leadership team should be participating.'

This teacher's comment on the pre-lesson meeting where the focus of the lesson observation is established gives an indication of the relationships built between teachers and students: 'I was aware of being open and honest, I felt vulnerable but this was good, the conversation was useful, more like I'd be with a sixth form group but these were year 11 and 9 boys. If anything it was them putting me at ease as the meeting progressed rather than the other way around.'

Despite voluntarily taking part in the initiative these teachers were clearly anxious about meeting the students and discussing their work. But judging by their comments it appears the degree of anxiety subsided through the course of meetings. Students expressed very similar feelings to teachers, indicating that despite the training, stepping into this new working relationship created anxiety as typified by this year 9's comment, 'I felt nervous and awkward, there were a few long silences. It helped that the teacher was relaxed and friendly and I felt more at ease once I knew what to focus on.'

For student voice to work successfully the relationships between observed and observers needs to be positive. The pre-lesson meeting is a key stage in building trust and understanding, as this sixth former indicated: 'It was easy to understand what Mr S wanted me to focus on. He related to me well and I felt comfortable and confident, it was good being asked my views as my opinions mattered to him.'

Teachers held interesting perspectives on being observed by students rather than their colleagues: 'It felt the same as being observed by an adult but less intimidating than a colleague, I was more at ease with students observing.' Another teacher stated, 'I felt more comfortable and less scrutinised being observed by a student than I would by a member of SLT.' Comments like, 'students were not intrusive', 'the class didn't react' and 'they ignored observers' all indicated that lessons progressed as they would have done without observing students being present.

This could be because teachers were not taking the student observations as seriously as those by colleagues or SLT. Alternatively it may be that the relationships that developed between students and teachers were amicable, based on trust and mutual respect which boosted teacher confidence and led to them taking students' views on board.

Teachers spoke of their slight anxiety when receiving feedback from students, although they wanted students to be honest with them so they could benefit. One teacher was pleased that students had been critical: 'I was slightly anxious about the feedback and didn't know what to expect but I was reassured that they had taken it seriously and glad they had found some negative points to make about the lesson.'

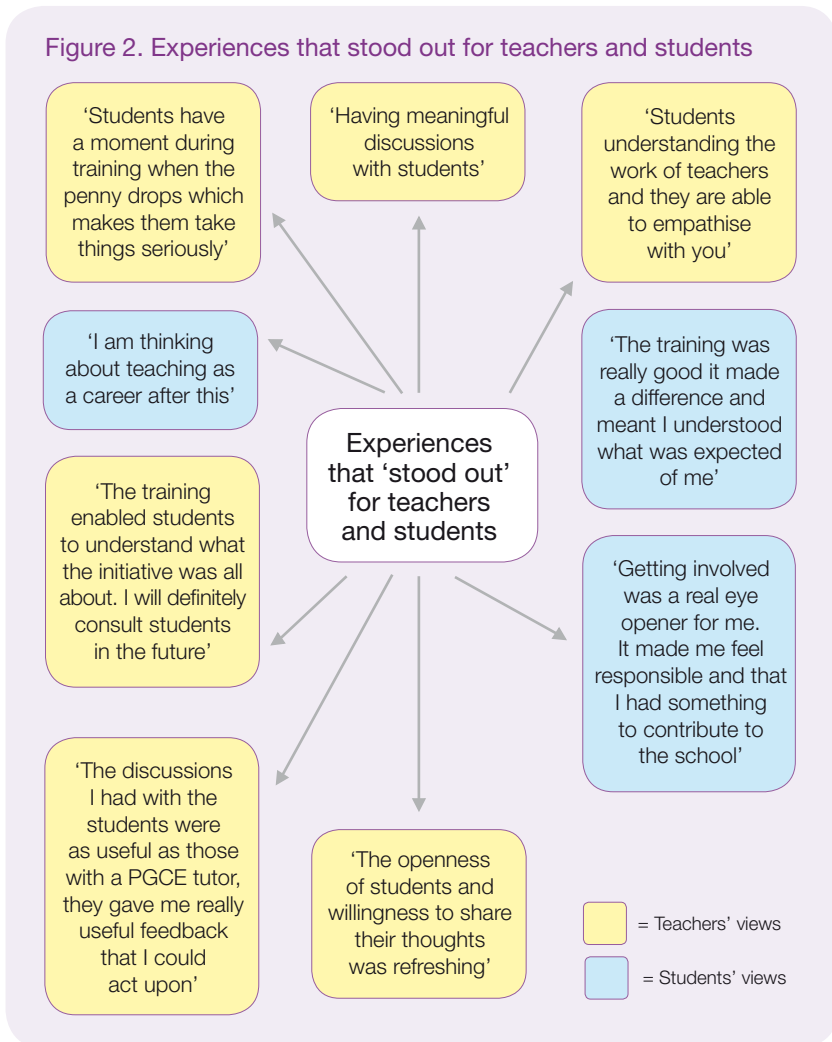
Teachers were generally impressed by the responsible attitude of the students: 'I didn't feel the students held back at all. They were very mature in the way they fed back their comments.' Teachers said they valued the feedback from students which they could act upon.

It appeared that students enjoyed the experience of giving feedback, perhaps an unexpected benefit to stem from student voice. A year 9 boy said, 'It was good being able to point out things that happened in the lessons that teachers were not even aware of, like how their position in the classroom made a difference to whether some boys were concentrating.'

In a similar vein, a post 16 student said, 'I had been very nervous about giving feedback, especially giving negative points, but I felt very grown up and that I had something to contribute because she accepted what I had to say.'

The main highlights students and teachers identified through their participation in the student voice initiative at Verulam School are illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2. Experiences that stood out for teachers and students



The comments by those teachers and students interviewed clearly shows the considerable potential of student voice for adding to the school's improvement. Student voice is really still in its infancy at Verulam, but has the potential to make such a difference to teaching and learning as well as student-teacher relationships.

Questions

1. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of introducing students as observers as a way of improving learning?
2. What might be the barriers and how would you overcome them?

7 How Towers School started the student collaborative lesson evaluations scheme

Robert Leach (year 8), Towers School, Ashford, Kent

After coming to an SSAT conference in July 2007, we decided to start our own lesson evaluations. We really liked the idea we saw from Hillview School in the conference and began planning to start our student lesson observations, or 'student collaborative lesson evaluations', as we call them.

We had a problem with finding enough staff to take part, as it was optional. So we started a working party of just five students and five staff, who met one Thursday morning a month. We devised a 'problems and solutions' document.

Problems

Evaluator might write a bad/good review because of their thoughts on the teacher

Friends might try and stop you doing the evaluation

Being swayed to write something

Teachers not wanting lesson reported on

Teachers want you to get on with your work

Being called teacher's pet after the evaluation

Solutions

Evaluator must stick to facts, but perhaps have a box at end to write their own thoughts

Have a table on your own, so that the job can be done professionally

Show an unbiased view

Teachers need to read a letter/ statement explaining what student voice is aiming to achieve and that it is voluntary to start with

Write short notes in bullet points

Report to the teacher you have been evaluating. Explain to students how you are making a real difference

The learning and teaching working party designed the current student collaborative lesson evaluation form, which each evaluator has to fill in for every evaluation. It includes such things as lesson objective; the visual, auditory and practical work; staff comment; student comment; and evaluator comment and evaluation – 'what worked well', and 'even better if'.

Other questions were asked – for example, how was the entrance to the classroom? What resources were used? The form was a great success and is still being used today.

The working party also devised some rules for carrying out evaluations. These included:

1. Make sure that every student and teacher is trained in this process beforehand, using a demonstration
2. Work with your normal class teacher, so that you know their teaching
3. Plan with the teacher beforehand to find out what they are doing in the lesson
4. Sit in your normal place
5. Wait until the students are working before you walk around
6. Wear correct uniform and make sure you have a collaborative lesson evaluation form and a pen
7. Plan a time for the feedback session, within 24 hours
8. Discuss the lesson evaluation afterwards with the teacher on their own
 - a) Good bits first
 - b) Improvement later
 - c) Good at end
9. Do not discuss names of teachers with other students or staff
10. Feedback to class should be given by the teacher and the student

In March 2008, we hosted an SSAT meeting and our school showcased the lesson evaluations to other schools. Two of the team, Beth and Karina, hosted a workshop; it included drama and open discussions. The students were given double sided, laminated card about the rules and protocols and the problems and solutions. The students who visited liked the cards and we received positive feedback. We believe that the workshops Beth and Karina held, and the information cards that we gave out, were a huge success. We received feedback from the staff and students, our delegates for the day, when they filled out the feedback forms and we hope we can host a meeting again.

The workshop gave a good message about the scheme we planned from the very start; the working party meetings, the student council meetings, the design of the forms, the proposal at a leadership team meeting, the first pilot evaluations and feedback meetings with the staff. Now our student collaborative lesson evaluation scheme is up and running.

Schools that want to start a student collaborative lesson evaluation scheme should start by forming a student and staff joint working party, which could then build an action plan. That action plan can then be completed, deciding how to carry out the lesson evaluations, discussing the problems and solutions, designing the form, writing letters inviting staff to join the scheme by being evaluated and evaluating the results. One thing that schools should never do is force the staff to be evaluated by the students, as this will lead to a negative view of the student collaborative lesson evaluation scheme.

As mentioned before, we set up a student and staff working party; this made a big difference as we all felt more involved in the scheme. We had many meetings and the members of the working party, both staff and students, fed back to the leadership team and staff so that everybody was kept informed. They 'snowballed' this effect to the rest of the school through assemblies and other means of contact, including basic word-of-mouth.

I think that the contact between the working party members was very good because we kept communication strong and we always kept everybody involved. This was through successful meetings, chaired by the students. In these meetings we had clear agendas, which were written by the chair and secretary and were distributed well before the meeting. Then, all the attendees, both staff and students, knew clearly what the meeting would include. A problem however was getting the staff and students together. We overcame this problem by meeting only once a month. The meetings were held in an English room during a lesson, which was changed to create a meeting atmosphere.

Questions

1. How important is the voluntary nature of this initiative?
2. How might collaborative models such as Towers' student observation help to develop learning relationships and learning?

8 Our learning journey: working with staff to improve learning and assessment

Rosie Preece, Helena Brennan, Hannah Whittingham, Joanne Kelly (year 12), Lucy Mann (year 8), Stokesley School, Middlesbrough, North Yorkshire

SALSA (students assessing learning for staff audience) is our post 16 student voice group. Our role is to improve learning by having learning conversations between staff and students. We joined the group wanting to make a difference to school life by making learning more interesting and having the opportunity to do something about things which we weren't happy about.

TANGO (teachers and students learning together) is our year 8 student voice group. The group arranged meetings within class with anyone interested in discussing the way in which we learn. It decided on the name TANGO for the year 8 group, which linked quite well with the post 16 group, SALSA!

SALSA meets regularly, sharing thoughts and ideas about learning. We were interested in the ways that teachers give feedback. SALSA actively researched feedback techniques, including comments on written work, one-to-one help and peer assessment, and evaluated their impact. We identified the strategies which helped us to make progress as learners (these weren't always the ones which we enjoyed the most!). We shared ideas at a joint meeting between staff and students, discussing the success of strategies and new learning approaches to create more focused learning. We came to the conclusion that interactive methods of teaching were most effective and a range of strategies is much better than mainly using the same ones, even if they are effective techniques. Group discussion and recapping were some of the more helpful, whereas handing out lots of notes and lots of PowerPoint presentations tended to be less helpful. We also thought that peer assessment could be used much more usefully.

Meanwhile, TANGO met up with the staff assessment for learning team to discuss their ideas and to design strategies to trial in lessons. We were put into groups with staff members, some who taught us and some who didn't. We felt confident to be open with the staff who were not our teachers, but we imagined it could be difficult to be as open with staff who teach us. The teachers seemed as involved as we were and were interested in what we had to say.

Some aspects of feedback techniques we researched were peer assessment in different subjects, using different success criteria, and making success criteria more pupil friendly. Using stick on notes, we each wrote three positive comments and something constructive for teachers to help students improve their work further. We also did this with our own work, using the stick on notes again, but writing down what we thought we had done well, and what we thought we needed to do to improve it further.

The learning conference

We found out about a new, exciting project that would help to get our TANGO wishes off the ground; the student learning conference. A lot of preparation from TANGO went into this conference which helped make the day successful, such as planning appropriate questions that we felt were vital to raise at the conference. We also had the exciting aspect of interviewing year 7 students who were interested in going to the conference, seeking the qualities we thought our students had to have, as spaces were limited.

SALSA's major opportunity to get involved with learning across the school was to lead at the student learning conference, where we acted as lead learners for a group of students in years 5 to 8. During the conference we looked at what we would do if we designed a school and focused on the following questions:

- What would we learn?
- How would we learn?
- What skills and qualities would we develop?
- What would our learning environment be like?

Working with students of all ages allowed us to begin to understand the value of vertical age groups. We were surprised at the enthusiasm of younger students and that we all shared the same central idea of wanting to be part of a better learning environment. All students were encouraged to express ideas in the 'diary room' and video clips from these were used at a staff development day. At the end of the day, students summarised their ideas with a presentation to the rest of the groups. This boosted confidence on the day and allowed us to use them at a later, follow up evening to parents, governors and students, to show our future vision for learning.

TANGO also experienced an immense buzz throughout the day, which we then later tried to recreate when we presented our ideas from the conference to parents and staff at an evening school event. We were in mixed age groups and gave a presentation on one aspect of the learning. The parents seemed to feel informed in detail and could almost relive our experiences of the conference. We feel that this has helped us to become better learners.

The follow up

The importance of skills was raised at the conference. We used this focus for our next SALSA staff/student meeting. There we designed activities for the beginning of the next academic year to help students to develop their learning, leadership and team building skills, including time management, research and effective revision/exam techniques. Through discussion we assessed how practical the ideas were and which would be most effective and beneficial to the students.

After the conference TANGO widened and developed to involve the members of year 7 as well as year 8 who were interested. Ideas raised in our small meetings were developed further by different year groups, which made them seem possible. It was a fantastic experience to have such a variation of age groups expanding an idea and branching out on one small thought.

What is the impact?

TANGO has so far had a major effect on a lot of students, as many of us are now confident and more forthcoming with opinions. A better sense of community is felt throughout school, with students feeling that we are all part of one big team, working together. Lessons are starting to feel easier to interact in, being able to give our opinions and using AFL strategies across the curriculum. Students feel more involved on how our lessons are run and there is a definite impact in the classroom.

SALSA has noticed a positive impact on proactive learning throughout the school. By working as leaders to encourage improved learning, we felt involved and have gained confidence throughout the meetings, allowing us to voice students' opinions in order to make constructive changes. By working with vertical age groups, we have helped build bridges between year groups and there is now a greater sense of community throughout the school.

What we learnt, and advice...

In the staff/student meetings, we found that some teachers were more open than others. It was important to focus on learning and was easier to talk to teachers who didn't teach us, although this meant that it was more difficult to see the impact of our discussions. Grouping students with staff who were very open and interested in listening to our ideas allowed groups to function as productively as possible.

If you are a staff member thinking of starting a group like TANGO, our advice is: you will have to be willing to give up your time. Lots of enthusiasm is needed to help meetings feel enjoyable, yet still informative. If ideas are raised in meetings, try and follow through with them in the classroom.

If you are a student and you think of an idea: you need to think from everyone's perspectives and whether your idea would be suitable for your school environment.

TANGO has already been a great experience for every student who has participated along with the staff and the school. Hopefully it will continue to grow, along with our ideas, building a better learning environment for our school.

Next steps

As a result of the student input in improving the learning process, a number of changes will be taking place next year. These include:

- A change of uniform
- The introduction of vertical forms to the school
- The opportunity to take part in the Professional Development Days for staff
- A whole day learning experience for year 7 students, called the Midweek Challenge

Questions

1. How are students in your school involved in the development of assessment for learning practices as part of department and whole school priorities?
2. Where in the curriculum can you identify and create opportunities for:
 - (a) learning conversations
 - (b) student led conferences?

9 Researching boys' writing

Tommy Styles and Haydn Horner (year 11), Honywood Community Science School, Honywood, Essex

The boys' writing project began when a trend in GCSE results was found. It was discovered that on average girls did 15% better than boys in exams. Our headteacher informed the staff of this problem. Analysis had shown that the main reason for the gap was the poor extended writing by boys.

In the last week of September 2007, the headteacher presented an assembly to years 9, 10 and 11 informing them of this trend in results. In this presentation he outlined the facts and told us that he wanted to resolve and change this trend. He then asked for pupils to put their names forward if they wanted to be involved in this project.

The aims of the project were to:

- Create a document to help pupils with writing that would be included in the school planner
- Present helpful tips for the pupils in an assembly
- Provide a document for teachers about the problems the pupils had and solutions
- Make a presentation to staff about how to help male pupils improve their writing

In October the head gathered all the pupils who had put their names forward and all wrote down their opinions as to the reasons why the girls were more successful and boys struggled. The members of staff involved then went away and collated all these results and chose questions to investigate further.

We then split into several groups, each with an individual question to investigate. These questions were:

- Can challenges and competitions improve boys' writing?
- Is writing easier in some subjects than others?
- How can we teach boys to write more in exams?
- What types of writing do boys do best?
- How can the school's ICT facilities (including interactive whiteboards) be used to improve boys' writing?

The groups consisted of pupils from all the years involved, mixed to get a varied perspective. The groups used primary research to look into their question. This involved questioning a cross section of male pupils about the issue. The results to these questionnaires were collated and then put into graphs before being reported back to all the groups.

As a result of our research the decision was made for a pupil organised and run conference to be arranged. We got in contact with various different schools and received a reply from the Thomas Lord Audley School. We decided to organise a conference with this school as we believed that our research was very limited due to the fact that it was only within our school. When first contact was made it became apparent that this problem had been noticed at the other school too, however they had different views on how to overcome the problem with boys' writing and different opinions on exactly what the problem was.

We stayed in contact with the school and a conference was then organised for January 2008 at The Stanway School's conference rooms. From the conference we hoped to try and fully understand the problem and to collate views on why we believe this problem exists and try to create resources for both pupils and staff.

We began the conference by presenting our research to the other school and we got their feedback on whether they agreed with the trends of the research. We then discussed how we believed the problem could be overcome, and what would be most helpful to both pupils and teachers in tackling the problem. We then created the resources which we believed could help to tackle the problem. A pupil advice sheet and assembly were created to try and aid boys with their writing. Also a staff training presentation was created to enable staff to help boys with their writing; this was from a pupil point of view on how teachers can best help boys.

The conference was a great success and all of the work done will be extremely helpful for boys and their writing. It was really helpful for us to get some different ideas about the issue and how to solve it from another school, and it was very beneficial for pupils and teachers in both schools.

Questions

1. How might you create more opportunities for students and staff to work together on departmental and whole school priorities?
2. To what extent should students be involved in working with staff to generate these priorities and why?

10 Big questions, helpful answers: an e-mentoring project

*Natalie Pavelin, Callum Pearce and Dan Waggon (year 7),
Sweyne Park School, Rayleigh, Essex*

- Will I get lost?
- Will I get bullied?
- How much homework will I get?
- What are the school dinners like?

Changing school is a daunting time in anyone's life, especially when moving from primary to secondary school. It's bigger, more confusing and full of big people!

We have all gone through it but now we are helping those making the transition. We are a team of year 7 e-mentors at The Sweyne Park School. This is our story so far.

Our personal memories of changing schools

'The night before, I was worried about getting lost and teachers being mad at me because I did not know where to go in the school. But on the other hand I was very excited.'

‘I was a bit worried about getting a detention for speaking when I was not supposed to speak and how much homework I was going to get. But also, I was looking forward to meeting new mates and having new lessons and new teachers.’

‘I was slightly worried, but excited at the same time.’

The challenge

We realised that many new pupils coming to secondary school find it hard to settle into a new environment, make new friends and find different places easily. So we e-mentors aim to help them to get to know and understand our secondary school before they come, to feel confident about coming to a new school so they are less likely to be worried or stressed.

We know that year 6 pupils do have lots of opportunities to visit our school, but we felt that asking questions by email is more anonymous, especially if you are not very confident or are worried that your question might be considered a little silly.

Getting started

We began to set up the e-mentoring scheme at the end of 2007. To begin with there were twelve year 7 pupils involved. All of us, the e-mentors, have been trained to give full and careful answers. We received proper training about the internet, using it safely and how to reply to emails from the younger pupils. While training we did role plays to show how to use the internet safely in a fun and exciting way. This way we remembered it more because of the fun that we had.

Launching the scheme

We went back in small groups to visit our old primary schools to introduce and explain the new scheme. We created PowerPoint presentations and role play to get them thinking about e-mentoring and about all the things that they could ask us. We also left a poster of us in their IT rooms. We hope that this means they can be thinking up questions when they see our photographs. They can start to think about who they may remember from primary school, who they would like to email and who might be replying to them.

Responding to the inbox

Our training was complete, the flyers were out and schools visited. Time to look at the inbox! For our first time we based ourselves in one of the school IT rooms every Monday after school. We had pointers to tell us what to write. We always had an adult supervisor to ask for assistance and make sure that all the emails were good and ready to go.

And here are some of our first emails. We talked about them in small groups and then wrote and sent our replies.

Dear mentor

I'm worried that the school looks so big. I'm going to get lost.

From Jodie (year 6)

Dear Jodie

Try not to worry. In between lessons you have about 5 minutes to get to your next lesson and we'll help you find your classrooms. The distance between classes is quite short and you soon get used to it. You can easily get from one end of the school to the other end in less than five minutes!

Write back if you have any other questions!

From Peter

Dear mentor

What are the school dinners like and what's the homework like?

Adam (year 6)

Hi

I'm Lily; I used to go to your school.

The school dinners are nice – we have a variety of foods like the meal deal, Paninis, rolls, pasta, ice lollies, ice cream and fruit. They don't cost a lot. We have swipe cards. I get given £10 a week for my card and this is definitely enough.

When you first come to Sweyne, you get given a homework booklet by your tutor. Two weeks later you start class homeworks. Don't worry. I thought homework would affect my social life but it certainly doesn't!

Hope this helps!

From Lily

Dear mentor

Do you have breaktimes?

Can I get help with my homework?

Holly

Hello Holly,

We do have a breaktime – it starts at 11:05 and finishes at 11:25. Lunch starts at 12:55 and finishes at 01:25.

The homework is quite easy because teachers explain it to you and if you need help you can either go to the teacher or a homework club or the library where there are always teachers who can help you.

Talk to you soon

Natalie

As you can see we try to answer all emails in a positive way so that new pupils feel confident about coming to the school. Sometimes we get replies back thanking us for our emails and saying that we have been reassuring or asking us more questions.

Hi e-mentors, thank you for your reply, I feel a lot better now! Thanks a lot!

In this way a conversation has then begun between the two schools. With this initial success linking with three schools, we extended the scheme to three more schools. This has kept us busy as it has meant more e-mentors, more training, more visits. However, we love it and really feel proud of what we are achieving. It's great to know that we have helped people by answering their queries and questions.

The scheme has been a real success so far and we are still getting emails and are still replying the same way we always do. Next year we will be training the new e-mentors in our safety course. We will also show them how to answer in the same way we have, in a positive and encouraging manner.

Questions

1. What internal and external student networks exist for your school to enhance peer support and to strengthen student leadership?
2. How might new technologies be used to further develop learning and support networks?

11 Learning walks cultural diversity project

Jenny Baldwin and Fiona Salisbury (year 8), Ringwood School, Ringwood, Hampshire

During June 2008 four schools – Ringwood School, Priestlands School, Hounslow School and Slough Grammar School – attended a residential project to look at cultural diversity and the differences and similarities between different areas. Four students from each school took part with seven teachers; we also had one year 10 media student from Ringwood to record video clips, pictures and sound bites. The aim of the project was to create learning resources for year 7s that can be used as part of a project on Britain to be used in geography, history, English and RE lessons.

Many people have the difficulty of defining the word culture. To explain it in a single sentence, paragraph, or even an essay or book is very hard, as culture means different things to different people. So that is why our school (Ringwood) has got some funding to set up what is hopefully a sustainable project. We realised that maybe the best way to understand culture is to compare different parts of the southern part of England – who better to do this than ourselves? The longer term purpose was to get students producing a year 7 learning resource for the September 2008 curriculum.

Our project has been organised across four days, over two weeks, out and about experiencing life in two main focus areas of Slough and the New Forest. This was more efficient and made us think and have more views rather than just researching off the web and from books. We divided our tasks into industry, housing, food, leisure, views of the community towards students, religion, languages and expectations of students. Our activities, which we helped to decide upon, included; horse riding, visiting a Hindu temple, an Indian meal, games on the beach and much, much more. During this time we spoke to other students and tried to come up with an opinion on the differences and similarities between the two areas and their cultures.

We faced a few problems, such as getting the work finished on time and coming up with a comparison between the two areas. The comparison was difficult because although the differences were there, they weren't particularly obvious and it was easier to ask the students about some things than actually look at the area.

To solve our first problem, we divided the work and thus spread the load and let certain people concentrate on certain areas. To come up with a comparison, we had to discuss it quite a lot because although we had seen both areas, we didn't have a conclusion on other people's views by the end of the project. Also, we didn't have enough time together with the different people to work on our presentations so, as we have a school virtual learning environment, we use it to contact each other and spread ideas.

Our project will make a difference to other students around the school by providing resources for a new topic for year 7, extending their learning and giving them an up to date version of cultural diversity based on the experiences of students of a similar age. It may help because some students may find it easier to work with the format that we will write it up in and this will stretch their learning further. It has made a difference to teachers as they don't have to create new lesson material, and they may find it interesting to look at it from a student's point of view and see if it makes a difference to the learning of the teaching group.

It was successful because we managed to visit many places and get lots of information in order to create the resources and presentation we needed. Both of the trips were great fun, educational and worthwhile. We all made good friends and learnt a lot about culture. It has also increased our ability to socialise, note take, observe and be able to present our notes in an interesting and confident way. Finally we had a feeling of success as we finished some parts of presentations and looking through them, we really felt great knowing that we had an input to help more students learn and understand how diversity in our culture is so important to Britain and the world today.

Advice we would give to other students/schools would be that you need to take lots of notes and observations; it is also helpful to interview students and residents of the area to get the views of others.

A point for the school to think about is: if you do have a diversity project such as this one, it is a good idea to get people from different schools involved because they will have a different point of view and can provide useful information about different areas, which can be very useful when writing a resource/presentation.

The students have to have a say when we decide what activities are going to be done as the teachers may choose something they think is fun, when actually it could be very dull. Also, when consulting students, we advise teachers to consult more than one, as we all have our different opinions, which is great, just not for deciding on a group activity. In a cultural theme, try to get a variety of students all from different backgrounds and families, as they will all have their different views and expectations.

Questions

1. How do you know what networks students would like to create?
2. What opportunities are there in your curriculum for students to visit other schools and learn with them?

Annex

Acknowledgements

**With special thanks to all students who submitted articles
and who contributed to the editing process:**

Honywood Community Science School: Tommy Styles and
Haydn Horner

Ringwood School: Jenny Baldwin and Fiona Salisbury

Saint George's Church of England School: Matt Love

Sir Charles Parsons School: Samina Hussain, Amber Cushing,
Jade Wearmouth, Billy Davis and Jake Gilbert

Stokesley School: Rosie Preece, Helena Brennan, Hannah
Whittingham, Joanne Kelly, Lucy Mann

Swavesey Village College: Emma Dobson

Sweyne Park School: Natalie Pavelin, Callum Pearce and Dan Waggon

Towers School: Robert Leach

Verulam School: Angus Keeley and Patrick Walker

The Voyager School: Olivia Brazier and Caitlin Ferguson

Thanks also to those whose support made this publication possible:

Peter Chambers, Publications Editor

Helen Fraser, Project Manager, SSAT

Ann Gosling and Andy Samways, Sweyne Park School

Kirsty Higson, St Georges School

Hannah Mayston, Student Consultant, SSAT

Tom Middlehurst, Student Consultant, SSAT

Jane Mullan, The Voyager School

Margaret Olive, Ringwood School

Ron Osborne, Verulam School

Simon Russell, Swavesey Village College

Kathryn Stephenson and Sue Loughlin, Stokesley School

Symone Stuart, Project Manager, SSAT

Catherine St. Ville, Towers School

Mark Williams, Honywood School

Joanne Whittington and Trevor Tyson, Sir Charles Parsons School

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Charity no. 296729. Registered in England. Company no. 2124695.

Printed by Impact Print Solutions. ISBN 978-1-906524-33-3

