



Activating voice IN YOUR CLASSROOM

Activating voice in your classroom

The classroom provides the optimum setting for every young person to find their voice and the confidence to express themselves. Their confidence is built over time through multiple opportunities to be actively involved in their learning, to make decisions, set goals, problem solve and reflect.

GETTING STARTED: SOME SUGGESTIONS

1. Use the feedback from an audit tool to start a conversation

Consider asking your students to complete one or both of the audit tools:

- *Voice in the classroom*
- *Agency in the classroom*

and discuss the findings with your students.

Appendix 1: Voice and agency in the classroom audit tools¹

2. Plan to actively involve students in their learning and reflect on the experience.

Plan to develop students' confidence and competence to have their voices heard as they learn. The following active learning resources may be useful.

JCT **classroom strategies which activate the key skills**

NCCA **Junior Cycle Key Skills Toolkits**

Select a small number of active learning methodologies to try out in your classroom. Review their impact on learning with your students and agree next steps. The following prompts may be useful;

What happens in our classroom at the moment that helps you to learn?

What can I do or change in this classroom that will help you to learn better?²

3. Encourage students to set goals for their learning

Encourage students to **set personal goals** (Managing Myself³, pg. 11) for their learning. This can be followed up with conversations with their peers and/or you, their teacher. The insights from these conversations with your students can be used to inform your planning.

1 The audit tools used in this workshop was initially developed by Roger Holdsworth and others in Victoria, Australia in 2018-19, and published in the **Connect** journal. It is used here with their permission.

2 Adapted from Student voice in Irish post-primary schools: a drama of voices. (PhD thesis; Fleming, Domnall 2013)

3 Key Skills of Junior Cycle: Managing Myself. NCCA

4. Other aspects of classroom life

Promoting active student voice is significant in all aspects of classroom life. Young people value a classroom or school culture where they feel cared about.

You might consider using some of the following ideas to reflect on classroom culture:

- Ask your students, “Who did you have your favorite learning experiences with?” Why was that? What can we learn from these experiences for this classroom? Where should we start?
- Using **Think, Pair, Share**, young people create a list of positive behaviors that would support a learning environment where everyone feels successful and supported. Agree which positive behaviors the class will focus on in the coming weeks. Agree how progress will be recorded/tracked.
- The class collectively reviews the norms/rules for this classroom. In groups of four, each group agrees the factors or practices which make this classroom a positive place to be and to learn in. The rules/norms should be re-written in positive, student-friendly language. Some examples might include:
 - All voices need to be heard.
 - Talk after two. (Translation: Each person must wait until two others say something before they can speak again.)
 - We will all be in time for class.
 - Everybody has a right to be comfortable in this class
 - We can all make learning happen for each other.
 - Presume positive intent. (In student-friendly language: “Would you say that to a family member or close friend?”)

(Adapted from <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/establishing-culture-of-student-voice-john-mccarthy>)

5. Reflection, reflection, reflection

Regular reflection with your students about their learning can help ensure that you plan for their learning in an informed way.

Reflections can be completed in a number of ways including written, spoken, illustrated, individually, in pairs and in small groups. It is important that the classroom culture is safe and inclusive in support of worthwhile and authentic reflection and follow up conversations.

Ask your students.

Check out some ideas to support reflection in your classroom

- NCCA **Managing Myself Toolkit** (pg. 16)
- JCT - Strategies to Activate the Key Skills **(3-2-1)**

Consider asking your students to complete an Exit Slip at the end of class. Some suggestions for prompts you might use are the following:

- List three things you learned in class today.
- What questions, ideas, and feelings did this lesson raise for you?
- What was your favorite moment of class? Why?
- What was your least favorite part of class? Why?
- Evaluate your participation in class today. What did you do well? What would you like to do differently next time? ⁴

For more ideas on reflection, see Appendix 2.

Reflect on their responses

It is important to follow up on the feedback received from your students so the young people are aware of the influence it is having. This can be done by sharing the feedback received with the class. A small group of students could be asked to collate the feedback and/or to report the findings back to the class, discussing next steps in the learning with the class.

Use the feedback to inform your planning for learning.

Communicate the changes you are planning to make with your students. Focus on one or two changes only.

Reflect and review regularly

Reflect and review regularly on if and how the changes are improving the learning experience. This can be done effectively and efficiently by taking 5/10 minutes at the beginning or end of a class to hear from students about how they are finding the changes.

⁴ <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/exit-cards>

5. Have a conversation with your colleagues about young people's voice in their education

With a group of interested colleagues, read and discuss [Giving students a voice in the classroom](#)⁵

And/or

With your colleagues, consider one of the following scenarios and plan collaboratively for encouraging young people's 'participation with purpose' in the classroom.

Scenario 1:

Keen to have a general, overarching conversation about learning with your students?

Consider discussing some or all of the following questions with your students:

- Why is it important to talk to students about their learning?
- What makes a classroom a safe and inclusive space for all students?
- What makes for a good learning environment?
- In what ways would you like to have a greater say in your learning?
- If you had a greater voice in your learning, what form would it take?
- What happens at the moment in our classroom that helps you to learn?
- What could happen in this classroom that would help you to learn better?

Share a selection of questions with your students and ask them to respond to their choice of one/two questions. Ask them to share why they choose this question.

- What do you find enjoyable about learning in this topic?
- What do you find challenging about this topic/subject?
- Would you recommend this subject to another student? Why? Why not?
- If I am teaching this topic/subject next year, what would you recommend I do the same? What one thing could I do to better support the learners?

Or

- What happens in our classroom at the moment that helps you to learn?
- What can I do or change in this classroom that will help you to learn better?

Or

- What does it look like when you are engaged in your learning?
- What holds you back from being engaged in your learning?

⁵ Giving students a voice in the classroom <http://www.jostensrenaissance.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/November%20ADSearchInstitute-Voice.pdf>

- What can I/your teachers do to improve how your education looks and feels?
- What can we, as students do to improve how our education looks and feels?⁶

Scenario 2

You have just taken on a class for a particular subject
Or
You and your students are starting out on a new topic/new area of the subject

Consider the following questions once you have introduced the subject/topic to the class:

- When you hear (topic/subject title), what comes to mind?
- Do you know anything about this subject/topic/area already?
- If you are to be successful in your learning of this area, what will make all the difference?

Junior Cycle for Teachers also provide a range of resources which can be used and/or adapted for this purpose.

<https://www.jct.ie/perch/resources/wholeschool/strategies-blue-sky.pdf>

⁶ Adapted from Speak Up in a Box, Ontario <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/students/speakup/resources.html>

APPENDIX 1: VOICE AND AGENCY AUDIT TOOLS

Audit tool 1. Voice in the classroom

Voice in classroom describes the extent to which students feel they have a voice about matters that affect their learning and engagement in their class.

Practice	HOW OFTEN DOES THIS HAPPEN?					HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS?		
	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOME-TIMES	SELDOM	NEVER	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
DISCUSSING								
1.1 Teachers and students have important conversations in our classroom								
1.2 There is a specific time within the classroom for students to provide feedback on learning and teaching								
1.3 Students discuss assessments that will be used to show what they are learning								
ASKING								
1.4 Teachers ask students for their views on learning and teaching (including by means of teacher-run surveys)								
1.5 Students and teachers discuss the feedback from learning and teaching surveys								
1.6 Students are asked about other matters related to their learning and experience of school.								

Practice	HOW OFTEN DOES THIS HAPPEN?					HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS?		
	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOME-TIMES	SELDOM	NEVER	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
PRESENTING ALL VOICES								
1.7 Students talk about classroom rules and expectations with their teacher								
1.8 Students participate in the compilation of school reports and preparation for meetings with parents/guardians.								
1.9 Students participate in conferences with parents/guardians and teachers about their learning and next steps for improvement								
1.10 Every effort is taken to encourage all students to express their views								
BEING LISTENED TO								
1.11 Teachers welcome feedback from students								
1.13 Students' views influence how learning and teaching happens								
1.14 Students' performance in assessments and homework influence how learning and teaching happens								
1.15 Students' views influence how the classroom is organised into a safe and inclusive space								
1.17 All participants in these conversations feel safe in expressing their views.								

Audit tool 2. Agency in the Classroom

Agency describes the extent to which students have the self belief to contribute to and /or lead decision making in the classroom.

Practice	HOW OFTEN DOES THIS HAPPEN?					HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS?		
	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOME-TIMES	SELDOM	NEVER	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
INDIVIDUAL LEARNING								
2.1 Students have time and opportunity to set goals for their own learning								
2.2 Students are supported to choose topics for learning and related assessments								
2.3 Students have opportunities to choose how they will complete assessments.								
2.4 Where relevant, students participate in the creation of their Individual Education Plan (IEP) with their teachers								
GROUP LEARNING								
2.5 All students are actively engaged in learning in their classroom								
2.6 Students and teachers work together to design learning activities for the class								
2.7 Students lead class lessons								
2.8 Students learn explicitly about teamwork, how to speak up, take action, and participate								

Practice	HOW OFTEN DOES THIS HAPPEN?					HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS?		
	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOME-TIMES	SELDOM	NEVER	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
ROLES AND REPRESENTATIVES								
2.9 Students have specific roles of responsibility in the classroom								
2.10 Students democratically select representatives for roles within and outside the classroom (e.g. Student Council representatives)								
2.11 Support is provided for student representatives e.g. training, time to consult with and report to other students								
CONNECTIONS IN LEARNING								
2.12 Students make connections between their learning and the world beyond the classroom.								
2.13 The outcomes of students learning (making media; resources, survey findings, etc.) are seen outside the classroom								
2.14 Students write for the school newsletter and/or website, local papers or present on local radio about their learning								
2.15 Students work with external community organisations around issues of shared common interest or concern								

APPENDIX: 2

Students reflecting in different ways

Through reflection 'in' and 'on' learning students can

- become more aware of the knowledge and skills that they have developed
- identify strengths and areas for development
- develop and action plan for future learning
- gain greater understanding of themselves and how they learn
- take more responsibility for their learning

(Students reflecting on their learning, pg. 3)

Students reflecting on learning is [here](#) in NCCA's Focus on Learning.

Reflections can be completed in a number of ways including written, spoken, illustrated, individually, in pairs and in small groups. It is important that the classroom culture is safe and inclusive in support of worthwhile and authentic reflection and follow up conversations.