

“Symbolic Representation and Student Voice”

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The Mistake

Assuming a political-democratic conception of student representation.

**In what way, if any, do student representatives
represent students?**

The Concept of Representation (1967)

Hanna Fenichel Pitkin

Types of Representation

Formalistic

Symbolic

Descriptive

Substantive

Formalistic representation

Represents by means of a formal process, e.g. election

Descriptive representation

Representatives qualitatively *mirror* whom they represent

Substantive representation

Representation is substantiated by *actions* in the interest of the represented

Types of Representation

Formalist

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Symbolic

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Descriptive

e

Substantive

e

Symbolic representation

Represents *symbolically* by shared conventions

The Change

Recognise that student representatives are *symbolic* of students' voices; accept and nurture this symbolic role and its significance.

The Benefit

Making the student voice visible and as of *value* in itself, not solely as a *means* to effect change or perform participation.

Application

Representatives are not two-way “mailboxes” to or from students.

They are symbols of the students themselves. Treat them that way.

In SSLC, the L is for *liaison*, not serial problem-solving



Case: Staff-Student *Listening* Committee

Stop listening for something *to fix*. Start a conversation, listen to the experiences students are having.

Case: Student Council

Stop managing the opportunities for student voice to speak.

Start an *independent* site for student voices and leave them to it.

One size does not fit all

Mid-term feedback listens to student voices *without* representation.

Conclusion

Elevating and hearing the student voice needs a new *attitude*, not new or refined processes.