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Engaging our Students in the Learning Process: Some Points for Consideration

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Abstract

Excerpt: Over the past few years there has been considerable emphasis on the concept of 'student engagement'. This at first sight is somewhat peculiar given that the mission of universities is surely to engage students in learning through providing the conditions and the environment in which learning will flourish! However, there are many tensions inherent in the world of academia today. The core business of universities is, or should be, creating the best learning environment for our students. In a context of mass higher education, increasing diversity of the student population, globalization and the new marketing of education, and increased competition between universities exacerbated by 'league tables', it is problematic to define 'the best learning environment' for engaging students in the learning process.

Keywords
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Student Engagement — What Does It Mean?

Over the past few years there has been considerable emphasis on the concept of 'student engagement'. This at first sight is somewhat peculiar given that the mission of universities is surely to engage students in learning through providing the conditions and the environment in which learning will flourish! However, there are many tensions inherent in the world of academia today. The core business of universities is, or should be, creating the best learning environment for our students. In a context of mass higher education, increasing diversity of the student population, globalization and the new marketing of education, and increased competition between universities exacerbated by 'league tables', it is problematic to define 'the best learning environment' for engaging students in the learning process.

In recent years the demographics of the student population have shifted considerably. There is a higher percentage of international students, there are more mature students both in undergraduate and postgraduate student populations, there are students with non-traditional qualifications and higher numbers of students who are the first in a family to enter into higher education. This is a heady mix to satisfy with vague conceptualizations of the 'best learning environment' and 'student engagement'.

At its simplest 'engagement' in an educational context refers to the time, energy and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance their learning at University. Krause (2006) expands on this definition and posits that:

> The well adjusted and engaged student is one who assesses and re-assesses their thinking as transitions and opportunities to engage in different ways continue through and beyond the first year of university.

This definition offered by Krause (2006), while eloquent and succinct, may embody some implicit assumptions. Given the heterogeneity of any student body, it is quite likely that 'engagement' will mean different things to different students. It has to be unlikely that within an increasingly heterogeneous student population, there is one measure or one definition of 'engagement' that encapsulates the level of motivation or the learning goals of each individual student.

Tamsin Haggis (2006) in her research on pedagogies for diversity, takes issue with the assumptions we make in higher education that "all students know that higher education study is about questioning, challenging, debating and creating knowledge as well as being about exploring and coming to know what is already known".

A further assumption in current definitions of 'engagement' is that the curriculum we offer will engage our students. It must be recognised that a curriculum for engagement calls for a teaching that is likely to engage, to connect, to lift, to enthuse, even to inspire. A curriculum for engagement calls for a pedagogy for engagement (Barnett and Coate 2005).

There are two equally important aspects to the concept of engagement: how the student(s) experience(s) university and university level teaching and learning (which in themselves are multifaceted issues) and whether the curriculum offered is designed to 'engage' the students.

The Context of Student Engagement

If university level study is to be a meaningful experience for our students, it is necessary for academic staff, administrators, policy makers and researchers to seek ways to better understand what factors and influences will lead to an institutional culture which promotes and encourages student engagement. This means we need to acknowledge that students are not automatons designed either to buy into the traditions and culture of an institution or to automatically understand the aims and assumptions of disciplinary specialists (Haggis 2006). We also need to consider institutional factors that might mitigate against engagement for some students, such as the social environment that is provided or promoted, the accessibility of administrative staff and procedures, the potential for cultural alienation and the hidden costs of university level education.

In a mass higher education system, we need to move beyond the rhetoric of diversity and interrogate its meaning. There are contextual factors beyond the university to consider. For example, the previous experiences of students entering into higher education may have been good, bad or indifferent – but they will have a bearing on intrinsic motivation – to understand university level learning. Language as used within different disciplines may initially be alien to some of our students depending on their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. It may be as Laurillard (2002) suggests that academic expectations are in themselves difficult to grasp. To 'engage' within a disciplinary context for example, students need to be able to 'apprehend the implicit structure of the discourse' (Laurillard 2002, p43). It is the role of academics to enable students to grasp the nature of the discourse rather than assuming that they do. It is important to emphasise that enculturation into the disciplinary discourse needs to occur at an early stage for students.

Many mature students (in particular) will have extensive work-related experience and may discover that there is a significant gap between espoused theory and reality (e.g. Schon,1987). The experience that mature students bring with them should not be negated but rather capitalized on through a curriculum designed to provide authentic learning experiences and authentic assessment of and for learning. A question that Barnett and Coate (2005, p44) pose is 'how might curricula be so fashioned as to nurture the student voice, to give students powers of human expression in appropriate and telling ways in different contexts with different listeners?'. Put simply, how do we show that we value and build upon the prior learning experiences of our students?

Students are often in paid work while they study and they often have other life commitments that are not easily set aside. There is a degree of anxiety about the number of hours some of our students are 'engaged' in paid work. While clearly there needs to be a level of balance, it is quite wrong to equate paid work with disengagement. This underestimates the potential value of the work experience and ways in which it might be capitalized upon. Indeed in studies carried out in Australian universities, some students assert that being in paid work was actually a bonus (apart from the remuneration) in that it forced them to manage their study time better than when they were not in paid work.

However much we strive to 'engage' our students, we need to reflect on our own assumptions about 'engagement'. An implicit assumption in much of the literature is that 'engagement' is only valid if it is high level. Students are however, astute and are likely to understand that higher level qualifications can lead to higher paid employment. Not all students necessarily aspire to achieving at the highest level academically. Thus another factor to consider with respect to engagement is the student(s) perception(s) of how relevant university level study is in terms of personal career aspirations and goals.

Measuring Student Engagement

The most common means of gauging students' perspectives on their learning experience is to carry out a survey by means of a questionnaire. While such a methodology is effective in obtaining responses from a large number of students, there are a number of inherent flaws. It is often the case that the survey tool is devised by staff who pose questions to which they think they need answers.

The survey tools and evaluation questionnaires are (by necessity) being sent to or presented to a very diverse student population, with an implicit message that one-size fits all – primarily for the purpose of institutional analyses, rather than for the students' benefit. Nevertheless despite these flaws, surveys give us a snapshot of student views at a defined point in time.

In the Southern Hemisphere, the most comprehensive studies of the first year experience have been carried out over a period of ten years across Australian Universities, led by the University of Melbourne (Krause et al, 2005). Full reports on the Australian longitudinal study can be found at (http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au).

The University of Auckland (UoA) in New Zealand has been conducting teaching and learning satisfaction surveys with undergraduate and postgraduate students since 2002 with considerable cross- over between the types of questions in the UoA and the Australian survey tools, albeit that the UoA tool is not as extensive as the Australian survey instrument. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to present an analysis of all questions presented to students in these survey tools, this section focuses on four issues considered to be strongly linked to 'student engagement':

- Academic Orientation and Induction
- Adjusting to study at university level
- Assessment of student learning

- Integration of ICT into teaching and learning.

Survey results on engagement factors

Academic Orientation and Induction
From the methodology of student first year experience surveys, it is not necessarily clear from the questions what it is students are evaluating. Orientation and induction for example are complex multifaceted procedures if carried out well. It is not possible to tell if students are evaluating one-off events, on-going programmes and or pre – preparation such as visits to universities. The questions designed by the researchers make it difficult for 'outsiders' to fully interpret the data. Nevertheless, in the survey carried out in Australia in 2004.

50% of respondents believed that orientation programmes provided a good introduction to study; 40% of respondents felt that the programmes helped develop a sense of belonging in the university community and 25% of respondents did not think orientation programmes helped them to feel a sense of belonging.

In the University of Auckland survey of first year students, 30% of the respondents considered that orientation activities were helpful in integrating them into university life, while 43% were neutral on this issue.

While these results can be considered to be reasonably positive, clearly there is a need to review our induction programmes in an attempt to engage more of our students at an early stage in their university career.

Adjusting to study at University Level
The outcomes of the Australian study on this question are shown in the table below. The outcomes for all three iterations of the survey are shown in Table 1 and tend to show an upward trend – suggesting – but only suggesting changes to teaching styles and strategies.

Table 1: Survey outcomes over a ten year period

	% Disagree	N	% Agree
I enjoy the intellectual challenge of the subjects I am studying	12	27	61
	12	27	61
	12	25	63
Lecturers often stimulate my interest in the subjects	20	35	44
	19	35	46
	19	31	50
I get a lot of satisfaction from studying	22	35	43
	25	35	40
	18	33	49

In the University of Auckland Survey (2006) overall 62% of respondents agree/strongly agree, that they have adjusted well to the teaching style of the

university. Students feel that the teaching style of their lecturers and tutors are important to their understanding of the course and their interest in it. This is positive because of the considerable efforts that have been made over a period of time to provide quality professional development programmes for academic staff new to teaching at University level.

Assessments and Standards

A major issue for all students is coping with assessment of their learning and understanding what is expected of them. Receiving feedback on a first major piece of work to be assessed is a watershed experience for first year students. Students often express confusion over what is expected of them and what a good assignment looks like in any discipline.

In the 2004 Australian survey 34% of respondents reported that they had received lower marks or grades than they had expected. What this indicates is that over a third of the students in the survey are confronting the reality within their first year that they are not performing as well as they had expected. For some students this will be a jolt to their confidence and they may well adjust their study patterns to achieve the goals they set for themselves. For others however, the situation may be demoralizing and they require extensive, constructive feedback to raise their awareness of expected standards.

Integration of ICT Into Teaching and Learning

The questions asked in the UoA Survey of 2006 relate to whether or not students need assistance with their IT skills and whether they use electronic resources and the institutional learning management system. Not surprisingly, a high percentage of students surveyed report positive levels of engagement with ICT in the context of the questions asked. In the Australian Survey, the questions and the responses are not dissimilar.

There can be no question that the advances in technology are effectively redefining both access to education and the educational process (Campbell et al 2007). However, there is a significant issue which universities must address. New generations of students have grown up with technology in such a way it is an integral part of their lives – and this builds their expectations that it will also be a significant aspect of their learning and education. Universities have not necessarily developed their teaching and learning strategies to embrace the full potential of technology. The real issue is, if we do not take on the complex task of transforming our teaching / facilitation of learning practices – we may well risk alienating our students and creating the conditions for disengagement.

Student Engagement and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

This short essay encompasses a number of key issues linking the student engagement agenda with a scholarly approach to teaching and learning, including:

- Developing pedagogies to encourage engagement

- Developing a curriculum that provides authentic learning experiences and assessment of learning

- Transforming teaching to make full use of the potential of technology

- Introducing and inducting students into the discourse of the discipline

- The importance of professional development programmes to enhance a scholarly approach to teaching and learning

As mentioned earlier the concept of 'student engagement' must be seen in the context of mass higher education, globalization and internationalizing of education, and the diversity of the student population. 'Engagement' cannot be seen as a single, clearly defined issue. Rather the issue should be viewed as being inextricably linked to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Promoting and encouraging student engagement, retention and completion requires us as academics to reflect on how we develop an inclusive and engaging curriculum and how we enhance our understanding of our students and their learning needs. Student engagement is a legitimate topic for research, development and scholarship for academic staff and this should be promoted and supported at the highest levels within our institutions.

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