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Framing student engagement in higher education

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Abstract

Student engagement, increasingly recognised as an important influence on achievement and learning in higher education, is being widely theorised and researched. This paper firstly reviews and critiques the four dominant research perspectives on student engagement: the behavioural perspective which foregrounds student behaviour and institutional practice, the psychological perspective which defines engagement as an individual psychosocial process, the sociocultural perspective which highlights the critical role of the socio-political context and finally, the holistic perspective which takes a broader view of engagement. Key problems are identified, in particular poor definitions and a lack of distinction between the state of engagement, factors that influence engagement, and the immediate and longer term consequences of engagement. The second part of the paper presents a conceptual framework that overcomes these problems, incorporating valuable elements from each of the perspectives, to enable a better shared understanding of student engagement to frame future research and improve student outcomes.

Introduction

Student engagement is a current buzzword in higher education, increasingly researched, theorised, and debated with growing evidence of its critical role in achievement and learning. Trowler and Trowler's (2010, 9) recent review goes so far as to suggest that 'the value of engagement is no longer questioned'. With governments increasingly interested in measuring student outcomes (Zepke and Leach 2010a), and suggestions that student engagement can act as a proxy for quality (Kuh 2009b), a clear understanding of this vital construct is essential. However, engagement is complex and multifaceted; an overarching 'meta-construct' that aims to draw together diverse threads of research contributing to explanations of student success (Fredricks et al. 2004). While all agree it is important, there is debate over the exact nature of the construct; a key problem is a lack of distinction between the state of engagement, its antecedents, and its consequences. While there is some overlap, four relatively distinct approaches to understanding engagement can be identified in the literature: the behavioural perspective, which focuses on effective teaching practice; the psychological perspective, which views engagem1ent as an internal individual process; the sociocultural perspective, which considers the critical role of sociocultural context; and finally a holistic perspective, which strives to draw the strands together. Focussing on higher education, this paper describes these four approaches and aims to clarify the construct of engagement and clearly differentiate it from its antecedents and consequences. In order to progress our understanding and improve the value of future research, an overarching conceptual framework is proposed that acknowledges the importance of the student and the institution while recognising the critical influence of the sociocultural context.

Behavioural perspective

The most widely accepted view of engagement in higher education literature emphasises student behaviour and teaching practice. Following dissatisfaction with college ranking systems and the measurement of quality in higher education in the United States in the late 1990s, a project was set up to develop a new measurement tool (Kuh 2009a). Student engagement was seen as an evolving construct that captures a range of institutional practices and student behaviours related to student satisfaction and achievement including time on task, social and academic integration, and teaching practices (Kuh 2009a). The emphasis was on how institutions can affect student engagement, drawing from Chickering and Gamson's (1987) *Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*. Within this perspective, student engagement is defined as the 'time and effort students devote to

educationally purposeful activities' (Australian Council for Educational Research 2010b, 1).

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and its successor the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) are the survey tools used to measure student engagement within the behavioural perspective. The NSSE (2010) has five engagement scales: academic challenge, active learning, interactions, enriching educational experiences, and supportive learning environment, while the AUSSE has a sixth, work integrated learning (Coates 2010). The items in the AUSSE are also grouped into six educational outcome measures: higher order thinking, general learning outcomes, career readiness, grade, departure intention, and satisfaction. Increasingly, these surveys are becoming the definition of student engagement; for example, in one study it was argued that, 'in order to better understand the concept of student engagement, it is important to review NSSE's benchmarks' (Kezar and Kinzie 2006, 151). This assumes the measure has high validity, an area of considerable debate.

According to the developers, the NSSE items and scales are theoretically and empirically derived with good psychometric properties – strong face and construct validity, and good reliability (Kuh 2001). Others disagree. There is debate over the structure of the instrument with Porter (in press) suggesting the domain definition is too broad and many items lack theoretical justification. The construction of the five scales has also been questioned. An evaluation of the academic challenge scale, for example, found considerable confusion and disagreement by both staff and students (Payne et al. 2005). Other scales and dimensions, developed through factor analysis, have been suggested (LaNasa et al. 2009; Pike 2006).

More importantly, the NSSE's predictive validity is disputed with a relative paucity of research relating the data to objective outcomes such as GPA and retention (Gordon et al. 2008). One such study across 14 institutions found very weak associations between academic success and the NSSE benchmarks (Carini et al. 2006). Interestingly, the linkages varied by institution and were stronger for lower ability students. Other single institution studies (e.g. Gordon et al. 2008) have found at best only modest contributions of NSSE benchmarks to explaining student outcomes with Korzekwa (2007, 45) concluding 'there is little evidence for predictive validity'.

Finally, the validity of the student responses is also cause for concern. The survey's authors claim the NSSE satisfies the criteria by which self-report data are most likely to be valid (Kuh 2001). However, the reliability of student responses regarding the skills they have

acquired or used must be questioned in light of research showing students struggle to understand academic terms such as 'thinking critically and analytically' (Australian Council for Educational Research 2010a, 3). Porter (in press) points out that even apparently simple items referring to actions such as 'had serious conversations with students' are open to interpretation – which conversations are *serious*? Problems with memory storage and recall, in particular the frequency of events across a year, the context of the question, and social desirability bias are all potential limitations to the validity of the data (Porter in press).

The reliance on surveys for measurement is a key limitation of the behavioural perspective. Firstly, a single survey instrument spanning all disciplines is problematic when there is evidence that teaching and learning vary across disciplines (Nelson Laird et al. 2008). For example, how is the number of assigned readings or length of written assignments, both items in the academic challenge scale, relevant to a design or mathematics student? This problem has led to claims that mathematics and science students are less engaged (Ahlfeldt et al. 2005), while others have argued that engagement is qualitatively different across disciplines (Brint et al. 2008). A second limitation of using a survey instrument is that it is a single wide angled snapshot and as such misses much of the complexity of the construct: Engagement is both dynamic and situational. Finally, surveys obscure the participant voice with no opportunity for a perspective that does not fit the predefined questions (Bryson et al. 2010). Longitudinal, qualitative measures may be more effective tools.

Due to its development as a tool for institutional improvement and comparison (Coates 2010; Kuh 2009a), the definition of student engagement within the behavioural perspective is limited and unclear. This restricts its usefulness as a research perspective for understanding student engagement. Blending institutional practices with student behaviour has resulted in a lack of clear distinction between the factors that influence engagement, the measurement of engagement itself, and the consequences of engagement. For example, there is considerable overlap between items included in the *active learning* engagement scale and the *higher order thinking* outcome measure. Much of the focus is on institutional practices such as support services; while these are important influences on engagement, they do not represent the psychological state of engagement (Wefald and Downey 2009). By focussing only on elements the institution can control, a wide range of other explanatory variables are excluded, such as student motivation, expectations, and emotions.

The behavioural approach does incorporate students' thinking processes as well as behaviour, as evidenced by subscales such as *level of academic challenge* and *active and*

collaborative learning. However, learning is also emotional (Christie et al. 2008) and, except for a single item assessing overall satisfaction, the students' emotions are not measured. That affect is an important part of engagement is illustrated by the finding that international students, traditionally high scorers on the NSSE, on a Coping and Comprehension scale showed signs of struggle and of being overwhelmed (Krause 2005). Interestingly, while tutors see engagement as cognitive, students see it as predominantly affective (Solomonides and Martin 2008). By failing to measure how students are feeling, the behavioural perspective misses valuable information that would give a much richer understanding of the student experience.

This is not to suggest there is no value in the behavioural approach. It explains part of the complex and multidimensional picture of student engagement, in particular the relationships between teaching practice and student behaviour. A particular strength is the inclusion of more distal consequences of engagement with questions about how their time as a student has contributed towards broader life skills such as understanding people of different ethnicities, developing personal values, and contributing to the welfare of the community. A second strength is the popularity of the approach allowing exploration of the impact of a wide range of variables on student engagement such as missions (Kezar and Kinzie 2006), expenditure (Pike et al. 2006), and learning communities (Zhao and Kuh 2004). New models of engagement are also being proposed such as Coates' (2007) four way typology of student engagement styles: intense, collaborative, independent, and passive, linked to the common distinction between social and academic engagement. However, the behavioural perspective's understanding of engagement is too narrow; a problem that the psychological perspective goes some way towards resolving.

Psychological perspective

The psychological perspective of engagement is particularly dominant in the school literature and views engagement as an internal psychosocial process that evolves over time and varies in intensity. A key strength of this approach, in comparison to the behavioural perspective, is the distinction between engagement and its antecedents. Various overlapping dimensions of engagement have been proposed including behaviour, cognition, emotion, and conation, with earlier work often defining engagement as just one of these, and later theorists suggesting engagement is a combination.

The behaviour dimension, paralleling parts of the behavioural perspective just

discussed, has three elements: positive conduct and rule following including attendance; involvement in learning including time on task and asking questions; and wider participation in extracurricular activities (Fredricks et al. 2004). For example, Finn's (1993) participation-identification model argues that participation in both the classroom and wider school leads to success, which then develops a sense of belonging which, in a perpetual cycle, further increases participation.

The second dimension, cognition, is illustrated by Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn's (1992, 12) definition of engagement as 'a student's psychological investment in and effort directed towards learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge skills or crafts'. This cognitive dimension most commonly refers to students' self regulation and effective use of deep learning strategies (Fredricks et al. 2004), as touched on in the behavioural perspective. However, within the psychological perspective, cognition also incorporates individual characteristics such as motivation, self efficacy, and expectations (Jimerson et al. 2003).

The affective dimension of engagement is a strength of the psychological approach: As 'there is an emotional intensity attached to the experience of learning that is often overlooked' (Askham 2008, 94). Some consider engagement to be synonymous with attachment, focussing predominantly on whether students feel they belong (Libbey 2004). Others consider more immediate emotions such as enjoyment and interest in the task (Furlong et al. 2003). The affective dimension highlights the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic motivation. With the former, the student is motivated to engage cognitively and behaviourally as a means to an end – high grades or a qualification for example. With the latter, the student is motivated by their pleasure and interest in the learning. There is a tendency in the literature to privilege the intrinsic over the instrumental approach. For example, Bryson and Hand (2008) describe the instrumental approach as false engagement, while Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) distinguish between procedural engagement, the more superficial and often task based activity, and substantive engagement, a more sustained psychological investment in learning.

Drawing on older philosophical constructions of the human mind, a few theorists have suggested that conation, the will to succeed, is a separate dimension of engagement (Corno and Mandinach 2004; R Harris et al. 2004). A much less researched and theorised concept, conation is considered to have six attributes: belief, courage, energy, commitment, conviction, and change (Riggs and Gholar 2009). Most theorists however consider the three

dimensions of behaviour, cognition, and affect adequately capture the psychological state of engagement (Fredricks et al. 2004), with recent studies supporting the view that the dimensions are facets of a single meta construct (Archambault et al. 2009; Wang and Holcombe 2010).

The key limitations of the psychological perspective centre on a lack of definition and differentiation between the dimensions. Clear definition of the construct of engagement is essential for shared understanding, but Jimerson et al.'s (2003) review shows that, of the 45 articles examined, 31 did not explicitly define the terms. In addition, not only is there considerable overlap with previously studied constructs such as motivation, learning approaches, and values (Fredricks et al. 2004), there is also overlap between the different dimensions (for example effort often appears in both behavioural and cognitive measures). There is also disagreement on the relationships between the dimensions. For example, Newmann et al. (1992) suggest a student can complete their work and learn well without being emotionally engaged in the topic while Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) argue that both behavioural and emotional engagement are necessary prerequisites for cognitive engagement.

These problems of definition have also led to inconsistencies in measurement. While there is some use of direct observation and teachers' rating scales (Chapman 2003), like the behavioural perspective, most measures are student surveys, raising concerns over the validity of the responses (Roth and Damico 1996). It is often unclear which aspects of engagement are being measured with some surveys focusing on single dimensions and others claiming to be a single general measure of engagement (Fredricks et al. 2004). In addition, the context of the engagement, for example school, peer, or classroom, is often unspecified (Furlong et al. 2003). More recently developed measures are attempting to overcome some of these limitations by measuring all three dimensions based on clearer operational definitions (Appleton et al. 2006; Archambault et al. 2009; Fredricks et al. 2005). All surveys have the problems discussed earlier of limiting the participants' voices and failing to capture the dynamic nature of engagement.

Despite these issues, the psychological perspective has much to recommend it. Psychology in the past has tended to treat feeling and thinking as if they were entirely separate processes but is more inclined now to see them as 'inseparable, interwoven dimensions of human social life' (Forgas 2000, 4). Viewing student engagement as multidimensional recognises this and enables a rich understanding of the individual's experience (Fredricks et al. 2004). Moreover, engagement as a psychological process is

considered to be malleable, varying in intensity and responsive to the environment, suggesting that there is much that can be done to improve engagement, although more longitudinal and intervention research is needed to support this (Fredricks et al. 2004). The final, and most important, benefit of the psychological perspective is that it does not conflate the state of being engaged with its antecedents or its consequences, a problem that is rife in other perspectives. However, in positioning engagement so clearly within the individual, there is a danger of downplaying the critical importance of the situation. Engagement is fundamentally situational – it arises from the interplay of context and individual.

Sociocultural perspective

The sociocultural perspective on student engagement focuses on the impact of the broader social context on student experience. In particular, theorists have explored explanations for the polar opposite to engagement, alienation, 'a subjectively undesirable separation from something outside oneself' (Geyer 2001, 390). Mann's (2001) influential work identifies contextual factors such as disciplinary power, academic culture, and an excessive focus on performativity that can all lead to the disconnection of students within higher education. Similarly, Thomas (2002) argues that institutional habitus results in an inherent social and cultural bias within educational institutions in favour of dominant social groups, leading to poor retention of non-traditional students. The experience of starting university is variously described for some students as a culture shock (Christie et al. 2008), learning shock (Griffiths et al. 2005), and akin to being 'a fish out of water' (Thomas 2002, 431), illustrating the powerful barrier this cultural difference represents to engagement for many students. This perspective on education is particularly common within feminist literatures examining women's alienation within the university culture (e.g. Grace and Gouthro 2000; Stalker 2001).

A related constructivist approach argues that higher education needs to take an ontological turn and institutions need to 'engage the whole person: what they know, how they act, and who they are' (Dall'Alba and Barnacle 2007, 689). Solomonides and Reid (2009) have proposed a relational model of student engagement that locates the sense of being, similar but deeper than the affective dimension of engagement discussed previously, at the centre. Barnett and Coate (2005) take the concept of ontological engagement a step further and argue that it entails a project of active citizenship and engagement with the political nature of the world. This ontological approach is well represented in the literature on student

identity. The challenges of renegotiating their identity within a culture where they are positioned as the 'other' has been examined with many groups of non-traditional students such as older students (e.g. Askham 2008), working class women (e.g. Christie et al. 2005), and ethnic minorities (e.g. Johnson et al. 2007). These groups are often described as not having the necessary social, cultural, and academic capital to easily fit into the university culture (Lawrence 2006). While potentially a less challenging process, more traditional students may also experience identity struggles and a sense of being an outsider in the world of academia (Mann 2001).

The wider socio-political context also influences student engagement. McInnis (2001) asserts that the term disengagement is misleading as it implies a deficit on the part of the students. Instead he argues that recent declines in academic engagement are due to societal changes such as market driven changes in universities, changes in societal values, increases in flexibility of delivery and online courses, and generational differences. The 'commodification of education' (Smith 2007, 684) and, in particular the widening participation initiative and the later introduction of student loans and higher fees, has impacted on non-traditional students in particular (Christie et al. 2005). Krause (2005) also notes that generational changes have meant shifts in the meaning of university study and therefore the nature of student engagement.

The sociocultural perspective offers important ideas on 'why' students become engaged or alienated at university, with a particular emphasis on non-traditional students. It highlights the need for the institutions to consider not just the student support structures but also the institution's culture and the wider political and social debates impacting on student engagement. It adds therefore a critical and often neglected piece to the task of understanding student engagement.

Holistic perspective

A few authors are striving to draw together these diverse strands of theory and research on student engagement. For example, researchers in the UK have proposed a more holistic definition: 'The conception of engagement encompasses the perceptions, expectations and experience of being a student and the construction of being a student' (Bryson et al. 2009, 1). In line with the constructivist approach discussed earlier, they argue for a wider focus that incorporates the notion of 'becoming', arguing that universities should be about more than getting qualifications (Bryson and Hand 2008). Engagement in their view is a

dynamic continuum with different locations (task, classroom, course, institution), and thus not measurable by surveys but best understood through in-depth qualitative work.

Like the psychological approach, a key strength of this work is the recognition of the importance of emotion. For example, findings highlight the critical importance of the teacher's disposition and in particular the need for warmth and respect to foster a sense of belonging (Bryson and Hand 2007; Kember et al. 2001). Bryson and Hand (2007) suggest staff need to consider three levels of engagement – discourse with students, enthusiasm for the subject, and professionalism with the teaching process. However, they also note that while individual staff are important, a wider institutional approach is needed that provides the necessary resources and supports both students and staff to be engaged (Hand and Bryson 2008).

In striving to take a more holistic view, this approach makes the same mistake as the behavioural perspective in that it fails to distinguish between engagement and its antecedents. For example, student expectations are included within the definition of engagement, and while this has been found to be an important influence on the student experience (e.g. Christie et al. 2008), to enable a better understanding, such antecedents need to be clearly distinguished from the state of being engaged. Bryson et al. (2010) suggest engagement is both a process and an outcome - that the former is what institutions do and should be labelled 'engaging students' whereas the latter is what students do and should be labelled 'students engaging'. A clearer distinction would be to recognise that what is considered to be the process is not engagement, instead it is a cluster of factors that influence student engagement (usually the more immediate institutional factors), whereas the outcome *is* student engagement – an individual psychological state with the three dimensions discussed earlier of affect, cognition, and behaviour.

In another attempt at integrating the research, Zepke et al. (2010b) have proposed a conceptual organiser for student engagement which identifies six research perspectives: motivation, transactional engagement with teachers and with each other, institutional and non-institutional support, and active citizenship. This organiser successfully draws together many of the influences on student engagement identified in the other perspectives: institutional support and interactions with staff from the behavioural perspective; active learning and academic challenge from the cognitive dimension of the psychological perspective; and the influence of external circumstances, touching on the sociocultural perspective. Also included is student motivation as expressed by the three needs proposed by

Self Determination Theory (SDT): autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan 2000). The organiser has enabled comparison of the relative strengths of these influences. For example, teachers were found to be a stronger influence than student motivation or external factors (Zepke et al. 2010b), while competence needs were more important than either relatedness or agency (Zepke et al. 2010a). The findings have also been translated into very specific proposals for action by institutions (Zepke and Leach 2010b).

As with the other perspectives, the limitation of this approach centres on issues of definition, categorisation, and scope. The authors acknowledge the contrasting behavioural and psychological definitions of engagement but leave this issue unresolved. If the organiser aims to clarify what influences student engagement, then a clear definition is essential. There is also some confusion between antecedents and consequences of engagement. While the first five items are all influences on student engagement, the indicators of the final perspective, active citizenship, suggest this is an outcome of engagement; for example, 'students are able to live successfully in the world' (Zepke et al. 2010a, 3). Finally, in limiting the consideration of individual characteristics to the needs proposed by SDT, the conceptual organiser excludes other important antecedents such as personality, academic skills, and expectations. Also missing is the critical influence of the wider socio-political culture.

Each of the four perspectives discussed offers useful and relevant insights into this complex construct. The behavioural approach highlights the importance of student behaviour and institutional practice; the psychological approach clearly defines the state of being engaged and acknowledges the essential role of affect; the sociocultural perspective foregrounds the sociocultural context in which student engagement takes place; and finally, the holistic approaches recognise the need to consider the student's own motivations and expectations. However, each only tells part of the story and problems of definition and poor understanding about the relationships between the variables is hampering progress. It is widely acknowledged that a more comprehensive understanding of engagement is necessary if the potential of this important construct is to be realised (Bryson et al. 2010; Fredricks et al. 2004; L.R. Harris 2008). The second section of this paper proposes a conceptual framework for understanding and researching student engagement that integrates these diverse perspectives and, in particular, more clearly separates the antecedents and consequences of engagement from the psychosocial state of being engaged.

Conceptual framework

The aim of this framework is not to produce what Haggis (2004, 350) calls a 'generalised, quasi-deterministic model' and it is certainly not to generalise and view the student as 'a member of a stereotyped, homogenous mass' as Bryson and Hand (2008, 13) warn. Instead it is the opposite. By depicting the complex array of factors influencing a student's engagement and by embedding these phenomena and processes within the wider sociocultural context, the unique nature of the individual experience becomes clearer and the need for in-depth study of particular student populations self evident. As well as being valuable for guiding further research, the framework is a useful tool for targeting interventions aimed at increasing student engagement. The framework does not claim to depict *all* the influences and relationships, but rather to disaggregate and organise the central variables and relationships between them. As shown in Figure 1, there are six elements: the sociocultural context; the structural and psychosocial influences; engagement; and the proximal and distal consequences.

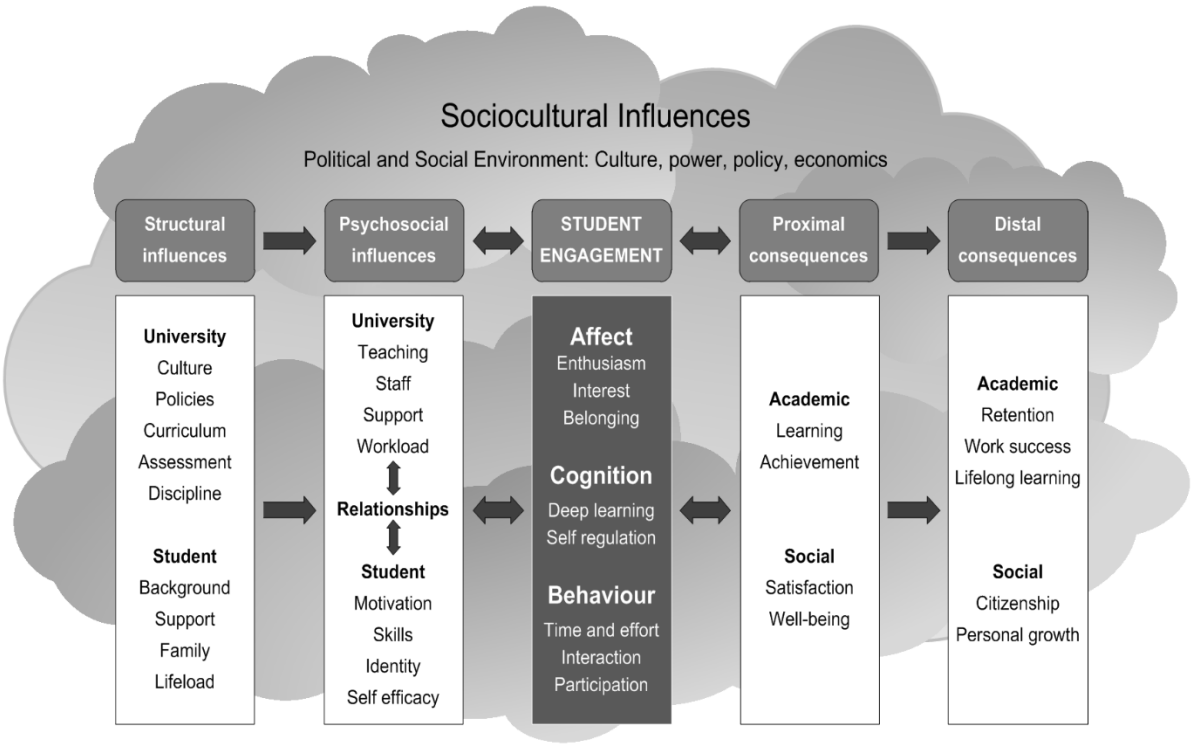

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of engagement, antecedents, and consequences.

The framework has the student at its centre. The psychological perspective is evident with the inclusion of the three dimensions of engagement, affect, cognition, and behaviour, as

recommended by Fredericks et al.'s (2004) comprehensive review. The different facets to the dimensions are also acknowledged; for example, affect is recognised as being both the enthusiasm for the topic and the sense of belonging to the institution. However, in order to highlight that student engagement is more than just an internal static state, this individual experience is embedded within the sociocultural context and shown as influenced by characteristics of both the student and the institution. A key strength of envisioning engagement in this way is that it both acknowledges the lived reality of the individual while not reducing engagement to just that. This goes some way to addressing Zyngier's (2008, 1771) concern that a narrow definition of engagement can lead to the impression that 'if the student is engaged then the teacher is responsible but if the student is disengaged then the problem is with the student'.

The immediate psychosocial influences are categorised as university, relationships, and student variables. There is little doubt about the importance of teachers and teaching practice on student engagement with numerous studies demonstrating the link (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Similarly, relationships with staff are considered to be the crux of the learning situation (Smith 2007) and feeling part of a learning community also positively influences student engagement (Lear et al. 2010; Zhao and Kuh 2004). The student variables shown are merely representative of the wide range of factors influencing engagement that have been studied; for example, motivation (Fazey and Fazey 2001), personality (Poropat 2009), and self theories (Yorke and Knight 2004). Understandably, institutions have tended to focus on teaching and support as targets for improving student engagement, however the framework suggests a further strategy could be to increase student awareness of the range of variables within their own control and the potential impact these factors have on their engagement and success at university. It is important to recognise that engagement is not an outcome of any *one* of these influences but rather the complex interplay between them as suggested by the arrows within this section of the framework. As Nystrand and Gamoran (1991, 284) point out, engagement 'depends on what teachers and students do together... neither can do it alone'.

The proximal consequences are divided into academic, learning and achievement, and social, satisfaction and well being, paralleling earlier work on academic and social integration (Tinto 1975). An important feature of the framework is the recognition that the influences are bidirectional between engagement and both its immediate antecedents and proximal

consequences as illustrated by the two-way arrows in the framework. It is widely recognised that engagement breeds engagement; for example, Llorens et al. (2007) found evidence that learners believing they have sufficient resources leads to increases in self efficacy which leads to increased engagement which then spirals up to greater self beliefs. Similarly, good relationships foster engagement which in turn promotes good relationships; and engagement leads to better grades which in turn motivate students to be more engaged.

Structural influences within the university such as curriculum and assessment have a recognised impact on student engagement (Barnett and Coate 2005). For example, the culture of academic assessment is an example of Foucault's (1977/1995) disciplinary power, a process of hierarchical and normalising judgement in a relationship of unequal power that risks alienating students (Mann 2001). Teaching and learning differ by discipline with a distinction often made between the 'soft' disciplines, such as humanities, where there is less consensus of knowledge, and the 'hard' disciplines, such as natural sciences and engineering, where there is greater agreement about both content and methods (Brint et al. 2008). These differences manifest in different approaches to learning (Nelson Laird et al. 2008) and different 'cultures of engagement' (Brint et al. 2008, 383). 'Lifeload', the sum of all the pressures a student has in their life including university, is a critical factor influencing student engagement. Employment, needs of dependants, finances, and health have all been noted as prominent (Yorke 2000). Zepke et al. (2011) suggest that the impact of these external factors may not be continuous but rather only exert influence at times of crisis.

The distal consequences of student engagement include not just the more obvious academic benefits but also longer term social impacts. Inclusion of these recognises that student engagement has the potential to have a much more profound influence upon students and society than merely content learning (Zyngier 2008). For example, Zepke et al. (2010a) include active citizenship, students' ability to live successfully in the world and have a strong sense of self, as a lens in their conceptual organiser of student engagement. Likewise, Mercer (2007) suggests that academic growth and personal growth are interrelated outcomes of higher education.

Finally, and most importantly, the framework gives prominence to the wider sociocultural influences. Rather than position the macro influences as simply the first link in the chain, the entire process of student engagement is embedded within these wider social, political, and cultural discourses. It is not just the antecedents that are influenced by this broad context, but every element of the student and institutional experience. Foregrounding

the impact of the wider influences goes some way towards addressing McMahon and Portelli's (2004, 60) critique that popular discourses of engagement are too narrowly focused on the procedural and so 'fail to address substantive ethical and political issues'. Mann (2001) highlights how alienating these sociocultural conditions and power imbalances can be for students and the framework illustrates the potential to counter these influences through change at more immediate levels. Mann's (2001, 18) suggestions of 'solidarity, hospitality, safety and the redistribution of power' are useful examples of using the more immediate antecedents of engagement such as relationships and university culture as pathways of change.

Conclusion

The aim of this review was to disentangle the strands of student engagement and to propose a conceptual framework to guide future research into this important construct. Viewing student engagement as a psychosocial process, influenced by institutional and personal factors, and embedded within a wider social context, integrates the sociocultural perspective with the psychological and behavioural views discussed. The framework includes not just those elements within an institution's control thus ensuring a much richer and deeper understanding of the student experience.

However, any attempt to categorise variables risks constraining understanding. It is important to acknowledge that the framework does not include every possible antecedent and consequence of student engagement and there may be some overlap between the structural and psychosocial influences on one side and the proximal and distal consequences on the other. However, as discussed, a lack of distinction between antecedents, engagement, and consequences is the dominant limitation of current theories. This framework clarifies these differences and highlights the primary direction of influence, thus facilitating a shared understanding of the complex process of student engagement and enabling the different research perspectives to be woven together.

Zepke (2011, 9) proposes complexity theory as a tool for understanding student engagement as a 'dynamic and non-hierarchical network' in which the factors are distinct and yet connected. This is definitely the case within the psychosocial influences as shown in the framework. For example, how a student responds to a teacher's enthusiastic teaching depends upon their own expectations, background, and personality. Similarly, the motivations and expectations of the student will influence the relationships they form. The network metaphor

also works well for considering the central element of the framework, the student experience of being engaged. As previously discussed, the different dimensions of engagement are dependent on each other, interlinked rather the discrete and disconnected. However, to describe the whole framework as an interconnected network fails to recognise that there is a dominant direction of influence from the antecedents to engagement and from engagement to the consequences.

No single research project can possibly examine all facets of this complex construct. But by starting from a place that acknowledges the multilevel phenomena and processes, and the complex relations between them, the focus can be on developing a greater understanding of one element without denying the existence of the others. The clearer our understanding of student engagement and the influences on it, the better positioned we will be to meet the needs of students, to enhance the student experience, and to improve the educational outcomes. More research is needed to further explore the relationships within the framework to strengthen our understanding of each element. One particular area in need of greater research in higher education is the role of emotion in student engagement. Much of the focus has been on behaviour and cognition and while the importance of relationships and the wider sense of belonging are recognised, little attention has been paid to students' more immediate emotional responses to their learning. For example, does the anxiety that many first year students experience impact upon the other dimensions of engagement – their behaviour and their cognitive strategies? The framework highlights the need for projects that focus on narrower populations, including single institutions, as it is evident that a broad generalisation of the student experience is ill-advised. The use of in-depth qualitative methodologies is recommended to capture the diversity of experience and also longitudinal work that examines the dynamic process that is student engagement. Most importantly, the framework highlights that there are numerous avenues for improving student engagement and that the responsibility for this lies with all parties: the student, the teacher, the institution, and the government.

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