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Developing Inclusive Pedagogies in HE through an Understanding of the Learner-Consumer: Promiscuity, Hybridisation, and Innovation

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Abstract

This article contributes to debates about how to respond to the changing profile of Higher Education (HE) students, and the marketisation of HE, by challenging prevailing views about student engagement, in order to develop learner-centric and inclusive pedagogies which are relevant to the twenty-first century. The concepts of ‘participatory culture’ and ‘co-creativity’ are often associated with the digital world in which the current generation of students have grown up. But it is a mistake to assume that some learning styles are inherently more participatory than others: participation is not an effect of the medium or form, (analog vs digital), or the space (actual vs virtual), or the mode of interaction a (face-to-face vs networked) through which the learner participates – it is an effect of the *practices* involved. Students engage with a complex network of both digital and analog texts and spaces, and it is this postdigital *hybrid* setting within which student engagement takes place. Marketisation provides an opportunity to actively demonstrate our commitments to student-centredness and inclusive practice, by transcending the binary opposition between ‘Student as Partner’ and ‘Student as Consumer’ and recognizing that students are learner-consumers, and allowing students’ diversity to drive innovation, rather than continuing to disempower students by bolstering practices which privilege some learning styles above others, informed by the assumption that innovation is technology-led.

Keywords Learner-consumer · Inclusive practice · Student engagement · Reflexivity
Co-creativity

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Introduction

This article challenges the growing dominance of preferred learning styles in Higher Education (HE) which are based on the spurious assumption that some media, technologies, and/or forms are more ‘participatory’ and/or ‘co-creative’ than others, and that some ways of learning are inherently ‘active’ or interactive. This assumption goes hand-in-hand with the notion that that technology merely, or necessarily, ‘enhances’ learning, allowing learning outcomes, curriculum content, and assessment criteria to remain unchanged, and allowing the ‘hidden curriculum’ to become even more powerful as a means of privileging some forms of cultural capital above others. It argues that this assumption underlies learning and teaching practices which prevent us from valuing the diversity of twenty-first century students’ literacies and competencies, and therefore sustains a mono-cultural approach to student engagement, which not only explains persistent attainment gaps, but prevents students from developing their own reflexivity (and therefore damages their career prospects), and stifles innovation in learning and teaching.

This article argues that all learning is ‘active’, and that the notion of ‘passive’ learning privileges some ways of learning above others and therefore derives from *anti-inclusive* approach, because inclusion is about *explicitly valuing difference*. A student-centred approach would require learning outcomes and assessment criteria which explicitly accommodate and encourage diverse and unpredictable outcomes, allowing all students to use whatever cultural capital they have already acquired, to engage in the complex and promiscuous practices of appropriation, in the negation of their own learning path.

Such an approach would enable all students to develop their reflexivity, i.e. their capacity to recognize the forces of socialization and to consciously change their thinking and behaviour, through the continued shaping of *their own* norms, tastes, politics, and desires, and would therefore enhance their career prospects by preparing them for highly-skilled employment, in a fast-changing world which is being transformed by the 4th industrial revolution, in jobs that do not yet exist (WEF Report 2019).

A range of theoretical and conceptual frameworks will be used in support of this argument, including Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu 1984), Leadbeater’s notion of participatory culture (Leadbeater 2008), post-colonial theories of identity (Hall 1996; Gilroy 1993), postmodern marketing (Brown 1995), socio-material approaches to student engagement (Gourlay 2015), and theories of the postdigital in relation to education (Knox 2019).

The intention is to stimulate the development new practices which:

- explicitly recognize the diverse range of competences and literacies which all students bring to their learning;
- encourage students to use these resources in shaping their own learning;
- value the unexpected ways in which they might do this;
- prepare students not just for work, but to be able to lead and shape the future of industry.

Higher Education Students

Demographic data tells us that students are more diverse than ever, not only in terms of socio-economic class and/or ethnicity, but also in terms of ‘lifestyle’ preferences and cultural identities (UUK 2018), and in terms of the range of motivations for further study, and the range of expectations of HE (Neves and Hillman 2019). But the needs of Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2015) have so far been viewed as a ‘problem’, rather than as the drivers of innovation in HE. These new markets have been stereotyped as ‘snowflakes’ and ‘careerists’, who prioritize value-for-money above the ‘love of learning’, rather than being recognized as sophisticated and discriminating consumers (Giammona et al. 2019). This is because they do not conform to the ‘ideal’ student who would enable HE to continue to deliver the same curricula in the same way, rather than developing innovative approaches to learning and teaching, in response to these students’ increasingly diverse and changing needs and expectations.

At the same time, it is often assumed that technology will resolve this problem by providing more ‘flexible’ means of engagement, enabling all students to achieve positive outcomes by somehow ‘enhancing’ learning, while allowing already established learning and teaching practices to remain unchanged. E.g. ‘blended learning’ is often assumed to be a solution for students who are not able, or not inclined, to engage in face-to-face activities. But technology cannot be understood simply as a problem-solving ‘tool’, because it is ‘embedded in, and entangled with, existing practices and systems’ (Knox 2019), and cannot in itself enhance learning. This can only be achieved by changing practices which have been in place long before new technology and digital media were introduced, and which the introduction of new technologies has left intact. And to do this, we need to recognize and understand ‘that contemporary student practices...are complex entanglements between physical and digital technologies, spaces, activities, and time’ (Jandrić et al. 2018: 896), and that contemporary learning is ‘becoming increasingly more diverse’ (895), in order to challenge some often-held assumptions about learning processes.

Understanding and valuing students’ motivations and expectations, (rather than seeing them as a ‘problem’ to be solved), would allow us to co-create learning experiences which reflect the values of diverse consumer groups (i.e. to become more inclusive), and to promote diversity as a way of providing choice through a pluralised approach to learning and teaching which accommodates and enhances students’ abilities as ‘bricoleurs’ (Matthews 2019), in the hybrid spaces of postdigital culture. This is to adopt a market-led approach to curriculum development, in contrast with the established ‘research-led’ approach which has largely failed to drive innovation in learning and teaching, and requires a new approach to student engagement which recognizes the value of diverse sets of knowledges and competences which students have already acquired, and accommodates a far wider range of learning styles. This is not something which can be achieved simply by creating ‘blended’ versions of what already exists, but requires an understanding of students as ‘learner-consumers’ who actively appropriate objects and experiences in highly selective and unpredictable ways.

2019 was the year that Generation Z became the biggest consumer cohort globally, who are proving to be the most discriminating and sophisticated consumers yet to enter

HE, and who choose their brand loyalties even more carefully than previous generations (Giammona et al. 2019). ‘Students (now) have high expectations of their university experience and what it can offer them in order to improve their lives. Diversity across the sector indicates that there is no one “student experience”: rather individual students have their own experience. It is therefore our responsibility to provide our students access to ...opportunities ... which will transform their lives’ (Shelton 2018: 7). And research (Yorke and Longden 2008) shows that there is no one single element of the student experience that can be controlled to enhance satisfaction. ‘The (sic) student experience’ is not ‘something generic that can be ‘delivered’ (Hayes and Jandrić 2018: 133) by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); it is produced by students themselves, in diverse, creative, and unpredictable ways, and ‘can only be discussed in the plural’ (137).

Evidence gathered through research at the University of Derby in 2015 highlighted students’ *personal* expectations and priorities, and that student satisfaction is determined not only by motivators (e.g. students’ individual goals and achievements, leading to perceived satisfaction when fulfilled), but also by ‘hygiene factors’ which are beyond the individual’s control. The research demonstrated the significance of both academic opportunities, (in relation to which students’ priorities are based primarily around intellectual challenge and career aspirations), and of other priorities such as building social networks, which depend on the social and cultural aspects of student life.

This research resulted in the introduction of a Student Experience Framework, intended to be inclusive of all learning styles. However, because the University explicitly positions its students as ‘partners’, but ‘*not* as consumers’ (Shelton 2018: 8, my emphasis), and because it was assumed that inclusive practice could be ‘delivered’ primarily by a ‘framework’, and ‘experienced uniformly by all’ (Hayes and Jandrić 2018: 139), the research neglected to capture the diversity of students’ notions of their own ‘total’ experience, to enable an inclusive understanding of the lived experience of students. The resulting framework consequently contradicts the principle that ‘there is no one student experience’, and re-enforces an established and singular notion of student engagement as ‘active participation’ in a relatively narrow and prescriptive range of activities, (e.g. international study trips, and involvement in University processes and projects). This merely re-enforces conservative and culturally-specific notions of acceptable student behaviour and, far from embracing diversity, re-asserts the values of the middle-class intelligentsia, for whom these activities have inherent value. An inclusive framework would not only recognize a much wider range of forms of ‘lived experience’ as ‘active’ engagement, but would embrace the *unpredictability* of what these might be, as the learner-consumer engages in their own self-transformation.

The need for personalized learning has been recognized in many universities, for example through the introduction of ‘personal tutoring’ schemes, but the potential of such schemes, to provide opportunities for students’ strengths and aspirations to be recognized and valued as drivers of innovation, has yet to be realized, because personal tutoring is often only a means of sign-posting students to sources of pastoral support, or of helping them understand their feedback, and therefore simply re-enforces a deficit model, where an assumed lack of competence is being addressed, and becomes increasingly ‘therapeutic’, (Ecclestone and Hayes 2009). The potential value of personal tutoring is to enable the University to **know** its students, (i.e. to know what they

bring, what they want to learn, and how they want to learn), and to use this knowledge to drive innovation in learning and teaching practices, enabling all students to benefit. This requires not only the introduction of new policies, schemes, and technologies which, in themselves, leave disciplinary boundaries and established pedagogies intact, but the promotion of a strong interdisciplinary staff-development ethos, and investment in the development of new teaching skills, e.g. in *personal* tutoring skills (which are quite different from subject-based tutoring skills).

To develop inclusive practices in learning and teaching, in response to the changing profile of HE students, we need to develop a more sophisticated socio-material approach to student engagement, where agency is understood to involve objects and artefacts as well as students and staff (Gourlay 2015; Latour 2005), and creates ‘possibilities for students to configure and customise their own practices’ (Fawns 2019: 140). To do this, we need to move away from the prioritization of ‘Student-as-Partner’ above ‘Student-as-Consumer’, by recognizing that students are learner-consumers who are actively engaged (as all consumers are) in the development of their own identities through the constant appropriation of objects and experiences, through a wide range of learning styles and modes of interaction, and by recognizing that students’ motivations for study (e.g. enhancing their career prospects), and their expectations (e.g. ‘value-for-money’), are perfectly compatible with a ‘love of learning’. Indeed, the enjoyment of study, (and therefore the likelihood of academic success), is entirely dependent on the extent to which students’ own values are reflected in their learning experience.

The Learner-Consumer

The learner brings an accumulation of assumptions, motives, intentions, and previous knowledge that envelopes every teaching/learning situation and determines the course and quality of the learning that may take place. The teacher may ignore or use this learner-structured framework, but the centrality of the learner is given. [So] what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does’, and the teacher’s role is primarily to adopt a focal awareness of *the learner and the learner’s world*. (Biggs 1996: 348-9, my emphasis).

Consequently, teachers should view students’ conceptions from the students’ perspectives, and ‘recognize that substantive learning occurs in periods of conflict, surprise, over periods of time, and through social interaction’ (349).

The learner is always already engaged in a process of self-transformation: it has become accepted amongst cultural theorists that identity is always ‘in production’, fluid and complex rather than fixed, or determined by socio-economic circumstances. Identities are performative; ‘temporary attachments to subject positions constructed through discursive practices’ (Hall 1996: 6). Identities are developed not in a relation of absolute distinction from others, but through parodic copying/emulation and

appropriation which creates hybridisation. This cultural ‘promiscuity’ drives the production of newness and difference, and testifies to the ‘instability and mutability of identities, which are always unfinished, always being remade’ (Gilroy 1993: ix).

Consumers are not passive recipients of good and services, but active participants in their production, and have always driven innovation in industry. Consumption is the active (‘creative’) production of socio-cultural distinctions, rather than a passive reflection of distinctions which already exist, and is therefore the ‘vanguard of history’ (Miller 1995).

Anybody who is learning anything is consuming information from books and teachers. They are also producing their sense of that knowledge, for themselves. If you could imagine education as pure consumption (although I always think in terms of a production-consumption continuum), then a student would just absorb what teachers tell them without producing anything of their own out of it. That would be a terrible education ... The best education involves teaching which leads students to produce their own ideas and perspectives, so good education is always prosumption. (Ritzer et al. 2018: 21)

However, there is no such thing as the ‘pure consumption’ that Ritzer refers to, because it is impossible to passively ‘absorb’ information without producing thoughts and, potentially at least, developing ideas which drive creative decisions. (And neither are ‘prosumers’ as straightforwardly exploited by capitalism as Ritzer et al. (2018) suggest, because consumption is always necessarily creative, i.e. selective, eclectic and, above all, *unpredictable*. This unpredictability exacerbates capitalism’s inherent contradictions and its tendency to crisis, which explains why reflexivity is so highly valued by employers in the creative industries). Because of consumers’ unpredictability, ‘no one knows’ (Caves 2005: 5) what new forms and practices they are going to develop, so industry needs reflexive graduates who are able to work as ‘cultural intermediaries’ (Nixon 2003: 8, 23, 25).

HE has much to learn from brand-owners who are increasingly conscious of how discriminating and sophisticated consumers are, in their expectations that the brand must reflect their changing values (see Noble 2018), and how, through the work of cultural intermediaries, industry allows consumers to become the co-creators of their products and services.

Consumer culture is increasingly fragmented into highly-differentiated ‘taste cultures’ whose ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1984) articulates the social position of participants. But ‘taste’ is not the *expression* of an already-formed identity, because, as has already been acknowledged, identities are performative, never ‘formed’ but always ‘in production’. The exercise of taste, and therefore the experience of enjoyment, is the *transformative production* of identities.

As consumers, students engage with learning experiences as a range of commodities through which they invest cultural capital, in the transformation of their own identities, and consequently in the development of a global knowledge economy. Like all consumers, students interact with objects and experiences, to produce inter-textual meanings *across* different media and forms, by drawing on a complex repertoire of competencies already developed through previous interactions.

The notion of ‘interactivity’ is often associated with new media and digital technology, which are often thought to have brought about ‘co-creative’ practices. The concept of co-creativity is an acknowledgement that everyone is involved in bringing about cultural change (Shirky 2008), but there is nothing new, or specifically digital, about humans using objects to transform themselves.

Markets have to be understood in terms of (temporarily) shared cultural competences, acquired by developing familiarity with particular images and objects, to produce a common repertoire of references on which to draw, in the production of intertextual meanings. As I have argued elsewhere (Partington 2008), ‘intertextuality’ is not a feature of objects/images themselves, but an effect of consumers’ participation in meaning-making activities. Consumers create meanings by using their already-acquired familiarity with other images and objects to make cross-media intertextual references. Such intertextual meanings, and the pleasures of creating them, depend on the participation of consumers and the exercise of culturally-specific literacies and competences. And because intertextuality is a product of consumers’ relationships with texts/images/objects, rather than a feature of texts/images/objects themselves, our approach to student engagement must acknowledge and embrace the unpredictable ways in which all students use texts, images, and objects, to produce meanings, and therefore to learn, and to enjoy learning.

In twenty-first century culture, ‘old’ and ‘new’ media have converged (Jenkins 2006), so, rather than thinking of student engagement in terms of a series of interactions with a collection of media-specific forms which have intrinsic formal characteristics and/or possibilities, we need to approach it as learner-consumers do – a complex mix of interactions with a continual multi-layered flow of images and objects where there are no fundamental distinctions between different media and forms. From the student’s point of view, all images and objects are ‘commodities’ which can be used to produce intertextual meanings, in the transformation of their identities and values. All texts and objects are potentially ‘promiscuous’, in that they can be made to refer to each other across formal boundaries, but this promiscuity depends on consumers’ abilities to ignore the boundaries between different media and between categories of object.

Access and Participation

Education is one of the means by which social and cultural hierarchies are reproduced within a capitalist economy (Bourdieu 1984), so widening access to HE does not in itself enable the development of inclusive practices in learning and teaching, which would enable ‘participation’. Diversity and inclusion are not the same thing (Sen 2019): inclusion is the *explicit* recognition of diversity as a *strength*, and as a driver of creativity and innovation. Education is only a means of promoting equality to the extent that it explicitly recognizes and values the diversity of knowledges and competences which students bring, and actively fosters their reflexivity.

Fostering students’ reflexivity involves explicitly recognizing and valuing whatever cultural capital they bring with them, focusing directly on students’ individual aspirations, and supporting the development of diverse learning styles. It also involves a willingness to address the persistence of the ‘hidden curriculum’ which continues to ensure that some forms of cultural capital are privileged above others, even when the ‘visible’ curriculum appears to be inclusive.

For example, although British art schools have pioneered ‘student-centred’ learning, and are increasingly committed to the concepts of student-led pedagogy, and to an inclusive and co-created curriculum (Finnegan and Richards 2015), it has been pointed out that art school pedagogies actually sustain a particular ‘habitus’ through which culturally-specific values are re-produced (Orr 2010), and it is not uncommon for teaching to be understood as a process of transforming students from ‘consumers’ (or ‘fans’) into ‘producers’ (professionals). This suggests that the knowledges, competences, and literacies that many students bring with them is not valued as a form of cultural capital (indeed I have often heard it said that students need to ‘unlearn’ much of what they already know). This understanding is based on a notion of consumers as passive recipients of (rather than active participants in) experiences, and a failure to recognize consumption as a driver of innovation, (despite the creative industries’ increasing use of ‘consumer generated content’ and the success of YouTubers and other internet entrepreneurs, who have never been anywhere near an art school, but have found better opportunities to demonstrate creative risk-taking elsewhere).

These attitudes expose the claim to student-centeredness as self-deluding, and explains the striking attainment gaps in art and design HE.

(T)he concepts of cultural capital, habitus and field, as conceived by Bourdieu ..are ...perhaps particularly pertinent in Art and Design, where it can be argued that (cultural capital)’s pervasive implications are masked by notions attached to ‘creativity’ and ‘talent’. ...and ...offers a lens through which widening participation can be seen as encouraging a more radical critique of the university and more particularly of Art and Design.(T)he ‘liberal’ nature of Art and Design and the focus on receptivity to more diverse ‘talents’ and offering the ‘fruits of the academy’ to wider student populations may in fact stand in the way of more fundamental changes to education, which a widening participation focus may require’ (Bhagat and O’Neill 2011: 21).

The art school habitus is sustained by a number of unquestioned assumptions about practice-based learning and active participation which, far from being student-centred, inform a culturally-specific pedagogy, and a hidden curriculum which is learned through a range of informal social interactions, thereby disadvantaging students who do not participate in particular ways. For example, the art school’s ‘studio culture’ depends on a visibly ‘participatory’ environment which, it is assumed, enables ‘active’ learning, in contrast with more solitary and/or cerebral activities (such as ‘working at home’ and/or engaging with the world via the Internet), which are assumed to be ‘passive’. However, the ways in which this culture privileges middle-class students equipped with particular forms of cultural capital, enabling them to benefit from this ‘hidden curriculum’, has not been sufficiently acknowledged. Underpinning such assumptions is a binary ‘active vs passive’ opposition which seeks to privilege some ways of learning above others, and fails to appreciate the wide range of learning styles which different students might prefer, or might adopt in different situations. (For example, commuter students are more likely to prioritize attendance at timetabled lectures, rather than peer-learning activities, and to maintain social interactions within their local community rather than creating new social networks which are campus-based). The ‘active vs passive’ opposition fails to acknowledge that reading, viewing,

thinking, and using social media, or engaging with a local community, are just as active (and ‘interactive’) as the learning activities which involve visible ‘participation’ in a particular ‘community of practice’ (Wenger 1998). Worse, it marginalizes and alienates those learners who do not conform to acceptable forms of student behavior which are recognized as evidence of ‘engagement’. It also prevents the socio-cultural competences which students might continue to develop outside University from being recognized as a legitimate form of learning. These consequences in themselves then generate some of the anxieties which personal tutors are faced with, positioning them as pastoral counsellors (Austerlitz 2008), rather than as enablers of reflexivity.

I would argue that there is no such thing as ‘passive learning’. For example, attendance at lectures is now typically viewed as a form of passive learning, and students who want to be ‘taught’ are often seen as passive learners. But attending a stimulating and thought-provoking lecture is an opportunity for active critical thinking and the generation of ideas. Students want to be ‘taught’ because they already know that a good teacher will inspire and motivate them, and as consumers they (not unreasonably) also see this as ‘value for money’. (And, not surprisingly, students from underprivileged backgrounds are more concerned with value-for-money than their more wealthy counterparts are). Students perception of value-for-money is primarily about the quality of teaching, and the likelihood that the course will enable them to get a well-paid job, in contrast with academics’ assumptions that it is primarily about class size and contact hours (Neves and Hillman 2019).

When asked about their experience of lectures, students frequently report that they find lectures valuable: the ‘evidence suggests that lectures elicit the lowest levels of anxiety in undergraduates...(and that) students are more engaged, learn better and enjoy themselves more when attending lectures...while students are frequently found to report that they learn less in active (sic) learning contexts’ (Garnham 2018: 10).

‘Participatory culture’, and related concepts such as co-creativity, are often associated with the digital world (Leadbeater 2008), in which the current generation of students have grown up. But it is a mistake to assume that some forms of learning are inherently more participatory than others (Ferreday and Hodgson 2008). In twenty-first century culture, ‘old’ and ‘new’ media have converged, and consumers choose, in highly unpredictable ways, how and with what to create meaning. Participation is not an effect of the medium or form (‘high’ vs ‘low’, analog vs digital), or the spaces (actual vs virtual), or the types of learning activities (solitary vs communal, face-to-face vs networked) through which the learner participates – it is an effect of the *practices* involved.

‘Culture’ is now widely understood as ‘participatory’ – a heterogeneous, promiscuous and conflicted product of collaborative practices, actively participated in by both producers and consumers, rather than something ‘produced’ by professional ‘creatives’ and passively consumed by ‘users’. It is also recognized that the *convergence* of old/analog and new/digital media and practices creates postdigital spaces within which identities/values are the outcomes of the transformative work of multiple groups/collectives and objects (Latour 2005).

Learner-consumers makes new meanings through a process of ‘bricolage’, i.e., by re-assembling whatever is available to them (Matthews 2019). New meanings (and identities) emerge when consumers ‘appropriate’ cultural products *whether they are intended to or not* – this is a common occurrence in everyday culture. Through the

shared pleasures of using images and objects, consumers are involved in the everyday/continual development of increasingly multiple/hybrid identities (which generates newness). The meaningfulness of the consumer's encounter with an object or image depends on his/her previous encounters with other objects and images, through which s/he has already developed cultural competences/capital. These competences can be used to generate any number of intertextual references, whether anticipated/intended by the producer or not, and the production of intertextual references generates the pleasures of consuming, and of learning.

Student Engagement

The same binary opposition ('active' vs 'passive') underpins prevailing approaches to student engagement, and therefore needs to be challenged if HEIs are to succeed in delivering on the aspirations articulated in their Vision and Mission statements, to enable students to *shape their own* learning and their own futures (see below). Student engagement is 'the process whereby institutions and sector bodies make deliberate attempts to involve and *empower* students in the process of shaping the learning experience' (HEFCE 2008: 8, my emphasis). British HEIs have invested heavily in ways to capture the student voice, and to measure their levels of engagement with their studies, and in using the data to drive change, through staff development. This data tells us a lot, and especially that *not all students are the same*, e.g. survey data tells us that that students from low participation groups are less satisfied with their courses than those from more privileged backgrounds (Warwick Economics and Development 2018). However, the relative lack of effectiveness of this investment (as evidenced by persistent attainment gaps and the lower satisfaction rates of less privileged students), so far, suggests that we are not hearing what students are telling us, because the established mono-cultural approach to student engagement is preventing us from hearing the increasingly diverse student voice.

Student engagement is commonly understood to be a singular range of particular and predictable activities which are defined by the institution, rather than a multiple range of diverse and unpredictable activities which are defined by students' own choices and preferences. Students are expected to 'engage' by making use of what is offered, and this 'engagement' is measured by the extent to which they do or do not do this, rather than by the extent to which their tutors enable them to develop their reflexivity, (and the extent to which the HEI enables them to do this by investing in staff development). To 'embed a culture of student engagement' (Hayes 2018), which otherwise exists only as an aspiration in VMS statements and policy documents, the notion of student engagement, as a means of 'empowering' students, needs re-thinking.

In discussions of student engagement, the concept of 'student as partner' (SaP) is commonly used in opposition to, and in preference to, the concept of 'student as consumer' (SaC), and the majority of researchers have argued that approaching students as consumers is associated with a lower academic performance, whereas approaching students as partners enhances their learning (Senior et al. 2017; Curran 2018). It has already been recognized that there are a number of problems with the concept of 'students-as-partner', including the issue of how to reconcile the power relations between students and staff.

Students' awareness of the power relations between themselves and their tutors helps to explain why some of them might enjoy so-called 'active' learning less than lectures, and also why the experience of receiving feedback is perceived by them as demotivating and unfair. Research has shown that tutors often make judgements about students, (not just their work), when marking and giving feedback (Orr 2010; Orr and Bloxham 2013). Research also shows that, far from being supported and enabled, students often feel *disempowered* by feedback from tutors, which they see as reflecting the values of the tutor (Blair 2007; Winstone et al. 2017), rather than a recognition of the student's own values and ambitions. This helps to explain why 'feedback' is not perceived by students as particularly important in terms of 'value-for-money' (Neves and Hillman 2019), in contrast with academics' assumption that students benefit from it.

The need to recognize these power relations has been acknowledged, for example by recognizing the complexities of student engagement (i.e. behavioural, emotional, and cognitive) and by 'recognising the importance of personal growth for both staff and students' (Curran 2018), i.e. that both are learners in the partnership, but the issue has largely been avoided, primarily by simply challenging the 'customer-provider' model of HE and what is perceived to be a 'dominant SaC ideology' (Curran 2018). I would argue that this does not address the power relations between students and staff, but simply masks them. This distinction between SaC and SaP is a spurious one which fails to value the cultural competencies and literacies which students bring with them *as consumers*, and fails to acknowledge the centrality of cross-media and inter-textual meaning-making – through interacting with and producing diverse forms of representation – to student practices.

As previously mentioned (above), consumers engage in the transformative production of their identities through the exercise of taste, and we know that students achieve more when they enjoy learning. Therefore, students' enjoyment, rather than the extent to which they participate in particular activities, would be a more meaningful way to measure their 'engagement'. Pleasure and enjoyment are not inherent features of experiences, but the effects of experiences which provide opportunities to use socially-specific skills and competences (cultural capital) which have already been acquired, in the ongoing transformation of self-identity (through reflexivity and cultural promiscuity).

Students' perceptions of 'value-for-money' highlight stark differences between their own criteria for assessing the value of learning experiences, and the assumptions often made by academics (Neves and Hillman 2019). This explains why lectures rated highly by peer observers are not necessarily rated highly by students, who expect lectures to 'add value' to material which could be accessed elsewhere (Smailes 2018), which is why students often choose not to attend (Kashif and Basharat 2014), and why the amount of time which students choose to spend on assessments is determined not by the weightings given by academics but by their own tastes and preferences (Attenborough et al. 2018: 16). Furthermore, students' perceptions of their own development are partly through their engagement with non-study activities (Neves and Stoakes 2018).

The concept of 'student as partner' masks the power relations between student and academic (and even supports the coercion of students into 'subject positions in the service of the ideologies of the more powerful') because it derives from a discourse

where ‘participation’ is understood only as ‘a desirable set of practices’ (Gourlay 2015: 402, 404) rather than in terms of the complex day-to-day activities involved in ‘being a student’, as a temporally situated set of social practices. These practices involve a range of literacies and competencies which students have already acquired as postdigital consumers engaged with a complex mix of media and forms. But in prevailing discussions of student engagement, what students bring is valued less than what they are *expected* to do, and what appears to support a ‘student-centered’ ethos is simply a re-enforcement of culturally-specific notions of acceptable student behaviour. The academic orthodoxy of student engagement attributes it to technology, documents, and frameworks, rather than to the practices of staff and students (Hayes 2018).

Normative notions of student behaviour are clearly culturally-specific, and reproduce white middle-class values, so it is not surprising that the survey data tells us that students from low-participation groups are less satisfied with their course than those from more privileged backgrounds.

Students are the (co-)creators of their own learning experience, through the active appropriation of the resources which universities provide, along with whatever other resources (including social and cultural commodities and experiences) they may have access to, and choose to engage with. Like all consumers, students are learning all the time, and making their own choices about what is interesting, appealing, useful, meaningful, and/or enjoyable i.e. they are *discriminating*, *reflexive*, and *promiscuous*. This might mean *not* engaging with some aspects of their course, and selecting and appropriating objects, images, and experiences (none of which are inherently more ‘interactive’ than others), to build on their already-acquired cultural capital and create their own new knowledges and competences.

The ‘student-as-partner’ approach to student engagement fails to acknowledge the centrality of active meaning-making, i.e., creating and interacting with forms of representation, to student practices and subjectivities. ‘The day-to-day business of being a student is saturated with a range of complex textual (including the visual and the multimodal) practices, both face-to-face and online. These texts are not merely means of information transfer, but are constitutive of both disciplinary and individual knowledge, and also *identities*’ (Gourlay 2015: 406, my emphasis). Students engage with a huge range of both digital and analog texts, via a complex mix of both digital and analog spaces, and it is this postdigital *hybrid* setting within which student engagement takes place, i.e. student engagement is a socio-material practice. Student engagement is identified by Gourlay as residing in networks of agency involving mobile devices and computers as well as books, artefacts and other objects which are usually thought of as merely tools or inert materials. But these texts are constantly being ‘appropriated’ by students and re-used in the practices of meaning-production, and in developing their own identities. ‘(W)hen learning is exciting and potentially transformative, students and lecturers may feel an intensely personal flow of engagement’ and ‘this powerful sense of connection with the subject matter and with the other people... promotes a passion for learning’ (Hayes 2018: 31).

An approach which privileges student-as-partner over student-as-consumer arguably prevents this level of engagement, and *stifles* students’ reflexivity (and their ‘love of learning’), by failing to value whatever cultural competencies and literacies they bring with them, (regardless of the types of media with which students have interacted to acquire them, and regardless of the types of learning activities through which they

choose to develop them), and by assuming that ‘engagement’ is an individual practice, rather than the highly contextualized outcome of ‘productive social and collaborative interaction’ (Fawns 2019: 139).

Innovation in HE

Many universities aspire to provide learning experiences which not only equip students with the skills to compete in the job market, but to *lead and shape* the future of the industries they will work in, and of the new socio-cultural spaces they will create. For example, the Vision of Kingston University London is as follows:

- Our students will be sought after for their academic achievements and their ability to *shape* society and contribute to the economy (my emphasis); and its Mission is:
- To enhance students’ life chances through inspiring learning, advancing knowledge, *innovating* professional practice, and engaging with society (my emphasis).

Kingston School of Art’s Vision is to be ‘a unique catalyst for *creative risk-taking* and *cross-discipline collaboration*. A place for *challenging norms, pushing boundaries and exploring the unknown*. [To] *stand at the forefront of thinking, creativity and culture, and redefining the world around us* (my emphasis)’. And its Mission is to ‘fuel a collaborative ethos through which we forge connection with industry and business, bring *innovative thinking*, and solve real world problems.’

In order to achieve this, universities have to be able to foster students’ reflexivity, (i.e. allowing them to *shape their own* norms, tastes, politics, and desires), which will enable them succeed in jobs which do not exist yet (WEF Report 2019). But initiatives such as personal tutor schemes and inclusive curriculum frameworks do not in themselves provide students with the opportunity to develop reflexivity, indeed they often become just another way of identifying lack of ‘engagement’, (if the student chooses not to meet with their personal tutor for example), and merely supports the production of ‘generic learners according to a particular vision of student success’ (Hayes 2018: 19), which treats students not as active consumers, or even as partners, but as ‘contractors from whom commitment must be “secured”’ (30).

Most HEIs in the UK are seeking to develop competitive strategies, to secure their viability within a newly marketised environment, and many of these are focused on ‘selling’ what is already on offer (e.g., investment in advertising, re-designed website, and statement buildings). But ‘selling’ is not ‘marketing’ (Brown 1995) - marketing requires the *development* of what is on offer, in response to needs of *all* twenty-first century students. In a marketised environment, leadership in HE is therefore, above all else, about enabling innovative practice to flourish. Creative industries learned long ago that innovation does not ‘trickle-down’ but is consumer-led (King 1963), and the history of consumer cultures shows us that markets are complex, continually shifting, and subject to fragmentation, because consumers have developed competencies and literacies which enable them to be increasingly reflexive and culturally promiscuous, and therefore unpredictable. Generation Z are even more discriminating in choosing their brand loyalties, and even more likely to make choices informed by ‘influencers’ from within their own ‘habitus’, than previous generations of HE students, (Giammona et al. 2019).

HE is lagging behind the creative industries in its failure to value students as consumers whose changing values and attitudes, and evolving literacies, will drive innovation. This would require a willingness to take informed risks (as with any market-orientated enterprise), but increased competition, league tables and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) metrics have tended (so far) to intensify the risk-averse tendencies of HEIs.

Innovation is now understood in industry as the ‘combination of contributions from a mass of independent and distributed participants’ (Leadbeater 2008: 87), but in HE it is too often understood simply as a matter of promoting ‘new’ tools (e.g. ‘technology enhanced learning’) and, without a more sophisticated approach to student engagement, this merely de-values some learning activities and re-enforces the spurious distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ engagement. Institutional policies which ‘promote (mainly) economically linked successes of student engagement... alienate the outcomes of teaching from the (staff and students) who produce them. Ultimately, ‘missing out’ this human content, as more embodied forms of learning, may well be self-defeating in reducing, rather than increasing, innovation’ (Hayes 2018: 32).

Universities in the UK which have made some progress in narrowing the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) attainment gap have achieved this by recognizing, (implicitly at least), that students are learner-consumers, in that they have socially and culturally specific values and tastes through which they develop their own identities. For example, Kingston University London has introduced an inclusive curriculum framework (Amos and Doku 2019: 30), which seeks to ensure that individual learners see themselves reflected in the curriculum (just as the producers of all commodities seek to ensure that consumers see themselves reflected in their products), and De Montfort University has established a pedagogical model (Universal Design For Learning) to reflect an awareness of the unique needs of individual learners in a wide variety of learning contexts, and to create learning experiences that remove barriers from the learning environment, which provides students with choices about how they acquire information, and with multiple means of engagement which take into account the learner’s interests and preferences, and which allows learners to demonstrate their understanding in alternative ways (Merry 2018). However, in order to avoid being merely ‘well-meaning but vague actions which are unlikely to effect change’ (Dale-Rivas 2019: 9), these initiatives need to be backed up by recognition of the work of staff, as well as students, in making them effective, by developing the skills to be able to do this, and by a willingness to acknowledge and address the ways in which the hidden curriculum continues to undermine such initiatives.

The notion of students as co-creators of their learning is a ‘wicked problem’ for universities (Willis and Gregory 2016), but many academics protest that co-creation is *not* to be confused with being driven by ‘conspicuous consumption’ (Senior et al. 2018). Consequently, while ‘co-creation is often spoken about as a pedagogical strategy ... there is little evidence of implementation’ (Willis and Gregory 2016: 1), and it is reduced to merely enabling the ‘student voice’, through which acceptable National Student Survey (NSS) results can be used to justify the *lack* of innovation.

Similarly, while all universities now claim to enhance students’ employability, there is little evidence of new pedagogical strategies to support this. For example, we know that interdisciplinarity has driven innovation in the creative industries, because media and practices have converged, and ‘hybrid’ practitioners are more likely to progress to

professional jobs (Cox 2005; Bakhshi et al. 2013; Bakhshi and Yang 2018). Yet most students are still taught by a relatively small course team, without access to expertise in other departments, and the majority of academics are entirely focused on their own discipline, encouraged to do this by an environment where curriculum currency is reduced to ‘research informed teaching’, and where ‘research’ is almost always subject-based.

Leadership in HE involves the development of an inter-disciplinary ‘learning culture’ in response to twenty-first century economic and social contexts (McWilliam 2010), e.g. by driving forward the ‘STEAM’ (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Mathematics) agenda. The development of an interdisciplinary learning culture is fundamentally linked to questions of student engagement – indeed the two projects are mutually dependent, because personalized learning is about the student, not the subject.

The introduction of ‘technology enhanced learning’ has had little impact in terms of changing established practices in HE, many of which have remained unchanged for more than a century, and the failure to innovate is due to a failure to recognize that innovation is consumer-led. Effective leadership would promote a staff development ethos to support teaching as a creative practice, i.e., a practice which is pro-actively and visibly responsive to students’ constantly changing expectations and aspirations. Research and staff development strategies need to be informed by an understanding of innovation as driven by the knowledges, literacies and aspirations which *all* students bring with them.

Conclusion

An understanding of culture as ‘participatory’ requires acknowledgement that knowledge is never value-free, and that its production is always contextualized by, and contingent upon, socio-economic circumstances. The purpose of HE is not, therefore, to compensate for an assumed unequal distribution of competences and literacies, but to recognize what *all* students bring to their learning, to enable students to use these resources, and to value the unexpected ways in which they might do this.

The marketisation of HE is often perceived as a threat to its accessibility, but access is not in itself inclusive, indeed can be just the opposite. I argue that marketisation is only a threat if we cling to a culturally conservative belief in value-free learning, which serves only to bolster neoliberal education and reproduce the values of the white intelligentsia. This belief underpins the binary Student-as-Consumer vs Student-as-Partners opposition which is not only spurious, but is preventing HE from developing innovative and inclusive practices. An increasingly competitive landscape provides HE leaders with the opportunity to actively demonstrate their commitments to student-centeredness and inclusivity, by recognizing that students are learner-consumers, actively engaged (as all consumers are) in the transformation of their own identities, by developing ‘new understandings of how digital technology is intertwined within other aspects of the spaces in which students and teachers act’ (Fawns 2019: 145), and of student engagement as the outcome of ‘productive social and collaborative interaction’ (139).

This would enable the concept of the learner-consumer to be embraced, allowing *all* students to benefit from their HE experience, and to contribute to a global knowledge

economy. A much more pluralised range of ways of learning needs to be encouraged and accommodated, to reflect a much more heterogenous mix of students, and explicitly recognize students' diversity as a strength. Curriculum content and assessment strategies need to recognize that social and cultural diversity is essential in driving innovative and inclusive practice, because the diversity of contemporary culture is driven by the cultural promiscuity of its participants.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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