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# Enthusiasm, frustration and exhaustion: staff perceptions of student engagement through the pandemic

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# ‘How can I feel like I am with the students and that they are with me?’: Staff perspectives on student engagement through the pandemic.

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## Abstract

The move to online and blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic brought about sudden, rapid, and ongoing change to learning and teaching practices in Higher Education. The paper discusses the findings of a research project, led by academic developers, which used a storyboard methodology to follow the experience of staff through the Autumn 2020 semester. Despite initial enthusiasm for teaching in new ways, staff increasingly became frustrated with teaching online and perceived issues with student engagement and interaction. By the end of the semester staff were exhausted by the process. Our findings raise questions about the future of teaching (as opposed to the facilitation of learning) the purpose of Higher Education now and in the future, and the role of student power and voice in that future.

## Introduction and Context

The move to online and blended learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic brought about sudden, rapid, and ongoing change to learning and teaching practices in Higher Education. The paper discusses the findings of a research project led by the two authors, both academic developers, which used a storyboard methodology to follow the experience of staff through the first semester of this environment in Autumn 2020.

The focus of the research was staff perceptions of Student Engagement through this period. Student Engagement is a multi-layered, complex, and often contested concept. Despite attempts (Fredricks et al. 2004) to define the concept in terms of three overlapping factors – behavioural, emotional, and cognitive – the sheer breath and volume of discussion have led some to conclude that Student Engagement remains in a state of ‘conceptual confusion’ (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017). In contrast, others (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) have claimed that this complexity merely demonstrates that Student Engagement has many meanings depending on different perspectives. It is not our intention to advance these discussions, nor did we work from a given definition of Student Engagement in this research. The aim was for staff understandings of, and approaches to, this concept to emerge through the research. We agree with Kahu's (2013) framework, which highlights that all student engagement work is contextualised and therefore our individual colleague's perceptions would offer insight into both staff and student engagement in our specific institutional context.

The impact of pandemic on learning and teaching practices in Higher Education was significant. The initial so-called ‘pivot’ (Salmon 2020, Nordmann et al 2020) to online learning in early 2020 was followed by considerable investment in staff development and technology by institutions to prepare for the Autumn of 2020 (Hodges et al. 2020). The emotional labour for academics, professional services staff, and students in

preparation for a new teaching approach was also significant (Cunningham et al. 2021, Cunningham & Cunningham 2022). Our research project was designed to follow staff through this semester at three points: beginning, middle and end.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Section 2 outlines our methodology and approach to the research project. Section 3 presents these findings in a 'traditional' way, bringing together the themes identified across the process. Despite initial enthusiasm for teaching in new ways, staff increasingly became frustrated with teaching online and perceived issues with student engagement and interaction. By the end of the semester staff were exhausted by the process. In Section 4 we delve deeper into the stories of our participants to bring out some of the different perspectives shared. We conclude, in Section 5, with some reflections on what this means. Our findings raise questions for us about the future of teaching (as opposed to the facilitation of learning) the purpose of Higher Education now and in the future, and the role of student power and voice in that future.

## Methodology

### *Study design and methods*

This was a small, qualitative, and exploratory study. It was conducted at a research-intensive Scottish institution between August 2020 and January 2021, following the timeline of the Autumn 2020 Semester. 12 members of staff were recruited from across all five of the institutional faculties. Qualitative research is well suited for investigating different views and experiences, and to help explain processes at work (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). The main aim was to explore academic staff reflections on, and experiences of, Student Engagement as they prepared, delivered, and evaluated their modules during Autumn 2020. The two specific research questions were:

(1) How did staff perceptions of Student Engagement develop or change during Autumn 2020?
(2) How did staff learning and other factors shape staff perceptions of Student Engagement during this period?

Ethical approval was granted by the General University Ethics Panel prior to commencement of the study.

### *Recruitment and sampling*

12 members of staff were recruited through internal communication methods at the university. These included: (1) announcements on a staff-facing module on online and blended learning, delivered in May, June, and July 2020 on Canvas (the institutional Virtual Learning Environment), (2) postings on the university learning & teaching SharePoint site, and (3) advertisements in the university staff newsletter / roundup circulated by email.

To avoid potential issues of power and bias in the data we purposely excluded staff who were participants in the two Advance HE accredited programmes run by Academic Development, as these staff would be being assessed by the researchers during the project. We stipulated participants must be teaching during the Autumn

2020 semester. Prior to interview, all participants received written information about the study. All were fully assured of confidentiality, the right to withdraw and advised any retained data would be deleted. All participants provided informed consent.

*Data collection*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the two authors, both experienced qualitative researchers. We split the cohort of 12 participants equally between the authors, with each author following the journey of 6 staff. The staff on the study were drawn from across the institution, including Business, Health Science, Humanities, Natural Science and Social Science disciplines.

To evaluate whether, and to what extent, staff perceptions of student engagement changed during the semester, we designed a longitudinal study to follow their experiences. This included a series of one-to-one interviews between participants and a member of the research team: one before the start of semester, one at mid-semester, and one after the module assessments had been completed. To achieve this, we used a storyboard technique as a prompt for our interviews. This technique was based on the 'story spine' by the playwright Kenn Adams (adapted by Hanesworth, explored in Cunningham & Cunningham 2022). Staff were asked at the first meeting to complete a fairy-tale storyboard looking ahead to the semester, and then talk through this with one of the researchers. At the subsequent meetings this storyboard was discussed, and changes made to reflect how events had unfolded. In the third and final meeting we asked participants if they would now change their storyboards, with a particular focus on the final 'happy ever after' section.

The longitudinal approach aligned to our desire to hunt down and capture the lived teaching experiences of our staff over this period of time, and to frame it as a story, with a clear beginning (the pandemic and pivot to online), a middle (how that played out over a semester in pandemic conditions) and then an ending (which a reflection on the future that lay ahead). In doing so, we encouraged staff to imagine a future using this traditional storytelling technique that could inspire *agency,* so critical at a time when everything was shifting and uncertain. For, as Storr reminds us:

> We experience our day-to-day lives in story mode. The brain creates a world for us to live in and populates it with allies and villains. It turns the chaos and bleakness of reality into a simple, hopeful tale, at the centre it places its star – wonderful, precious *me* – who it sets on a series of goals that become the plots of our lives (Storr, 2019 p. 3)

*Data analysis*

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify, interpret and report patterns and themes. Pseudonyms have been used to preserve anonymity. Interview video recordings were automatically transcribed and then cross-checked by the two authors. A coding framework was developed to provide a fair representation of participant views, with authors completing this simultaneously. Similarities and consistencies ensured reliability and trustworthiness of the research

process. We then focused on searching for further themes, sub-themes and combined different codes to represent data aspects. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can be widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions. It has been seen as a 'method for identifying, analysing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set' (Nowell et al. 2017).

## Results

*Enthusiasm*

The initial interviews were filled with a sense of energy and anticipation for the semester ahead. The benefits of support from professional services staff, such as Learning Technologists and Academic Developers, was mentioned by every participant in the study. Support within disciplines from colleagues was also praised, including online meetings to share tips and ideas. As Ameila put it: 'I learned I can ask people for help. I learned we all want to share ideas, and that sharing will help enormously.' One colleague, Lauren, working away from campus, pointed out that the move online had improved her connection to the University – as events which usually happened on campus (such as the Learning & Teaching Conference) were now online and so accessible to her.

Participants were unsure whether, and in what ways, students would engage in the online setting. Blake liked to do activities at the start of her module and was unsure how this would translate online. Ella, George and Isa were worried that the personal connection with their students would be lost – how 'reading the room' and classroom management would become more challenging. Jade wondered whether she could be as inspiring through a webcam as she could be in class: 'I'm an actor and I miss the live stage.' In contrast, Kelly felt happier teaching without the pressure of 'performance' and relying on 'charisma' to get her through.

Despite concerns about engagement, participants repeatedly mentioned their excitement for new ways of teaching and for new ideas. One colleague, Charlie, even stated that he was enjoying the challenge so much he had deliberately been working overtime over the summer on his new materials. Another, Isa, shared her sheer joy and excitement that conversations about pedagogy were happening right across the University – 'let's have more of this!' Some participants felt that the move online would enhance learning and teaching: Ella, for example, felt that lectures going online would be an example of this. George made a similar point, in that enhanced online learning could improve the discussion and collaboration sessions for students. Madison was already predicting that in his discipline they would never go back to standard lectures for 1$^{st}$ and 2$^{nd}$ year classes.

There was recognition that no-one, staff or students, had signed up for online learning, and this added some pressure (Kelly), and the feeling that staff had to 'live up to' the expectations of 'the University' (Ella). There were also some rumblings in relation to research: from a sense of guilt in no longer doing research (Amelia) to a foreboding of tension ahead with researchers who 'shouldn't get away with not doing pedagogy' (Isa). Despite these worries, most staff were really looking forward to the semester ahead. Blake cited how, in her experience, the university 'students are amazing' and that we 'are all in this together, staff and students'. This resonated with Kelly's thought that students could see that staff were themselves learning in a new environment. 'We

know what we are doing' suggested Lauren, whilst Isa remained 'quietly confident' that things would go well.

*Frustration, Doubt and Uncertainty*

By the middle stage of our research much of the initial positivity had waned. The most common comment was about the time involved in planning and creating online resources: 'I could spend all week just on this – but the day job is still there!' (Ella) Things like editing the closed captions on videos had taken much longer than expected (Francis), and online teaching felt both more intense and fast-paced (Amelia). As Lauren put it: there was no 'breathing space' for staff. This raised the issue of staff wellbeing, Charlie felt his workload was unsustainable, and was relieved retirement was on the horizon, so that this experience would not define his career.

There were some positives: that there were parts on online learning which should be kept, like online delivery of lectures (Ella). But most colleagues clearly missed the face-to-face contact with their students. Staff were missing the body language, the interaction in class (Amelia). This came across strongly for Isa:

> The biggest change for me is not in the content or the actual learning, but rather how I can make what used to be face-to-face, be interactive in an online environment. How can I feel like I am with the students and that they are with me?

This was tinged with frustration – that some students found it easier to 'hide' online and didn't want to have an online presence in the learning environment. Some staff wondered what this meant for them and being a good teacher: 'Some rely on charisma, but that's not me, maybe this is harder to do online in any case – I'm happier when I don't have to be funny / natural / entertainer / performer' (Kelly). The communication and interpersonal skills of teachers who are popular in a face-to-face context did not always translate so well in the online world. For Kelly, the research and design skills had led to the creation of some excellent teaching materials and resources that were being recognised by fellow colleagues. In this case, there was a newly found pleasure and even confidence in teaching compared to the traditional approaches. This shapeshifting potentially broadens our scope and understanding of student engagement and helps us move away from the relational aspect of pedagogy towards something more meaningful and authentic for individual teachers.

One surprising finding at this stage was Isa - who felt criticised for being too 'good' at online teaching.

> I have experienced negative feedback from colleagues that I have done more than the asked for 'your best is good enough'. I am not sure how I will overcome this. It is the challenge that I am feeling very uncertain about.

She was told that the department required a standardised approach, rather than a 'shining star'. Isa was 'pissed off' with this, as she felt she knew what her students needed, and that all staff were individuals. Peer pressure from disciplinary colleagues that they were letting them down because of the quality of their newly developed materials and approaches was startling for us as researchers.

*Exhaustion: Fatigue yet Relief*

By the time of our final meetings, after the semester was completed, it was clear that many staff were exhausted. As Madison described it:

> Remaining agile is exhausting. The labour involved in preparation and support is very significant […] everyone is simultaneously trying to work out the new rules of engagement to create a consistent student experience.

Charlie described his experience teaching the Autumn semester as being under ‘a constant state of anxiety’. There was a lack of satisfaction in online teaching, and that nobody was looking out for staff and their wellbeing: ‘I never understood what the university felt was too much’ (Amelia). Some staff felt guilty that they hadn’t done enough for their students, while others felt the ‘hand-holding’ of online learning had the potential to make university more like school, and so bring the ‘death of intellectual curiosity’ (Amelia). Jade mourned the loss of research time due to increased teaching load. Most participants agreed with Blake’s sentiment that she did not want to teach online again in the future.

There was clear frustration with the lack of student engagement. Ella questioned the commitment and effort of her students, why they had chosen to study at all, admitting that this remained something of a mystery to her. Madison echoed this with his frustration of spending significant time on preparing materials which few students even looked at: ‘the analytics were pretty sobering from a couple of modules’. Despite her best efforts, Amelia felt some of her attempts to engage with students had fallen flat – concluding that ‘a time of crisis is not a time to innovate’. As Ella reflected, though, this frustration might not be abnormal: ‘It’s the nature of any academics to be disappointed by any cohort and their assessment.’

The relationship with colleagues, which we saw raised at the mid-point, had become even more significant. Isa remained frustrated with the engagement of some of her colleagues, those who ‘have been absent from the whole conversation and made minimum effort online’. Ella noted that the departmental message at the end of semester was that ‘we can all agree that we were too good’ and that the talk now was of ‘doing a bit less’. Ella was clearly unhappy with the suggestion of being ‘too good’ at teaching, and annoyed that this was the emerging narrative from senior leaders.

There was an overwhelming sense of relief from all the participants, a relief that the semester was over. This gave something of glimmer for the future – that we should be happy with the achievement of moving all our teaching online (Lauren). Some made comparisons to the rest of the sector and that, actually, our university had done well considering the ‘horror stories’ elsewhere (Madison).

## Discussion: Delving Deeper

The findings above bring together the research into a coherent narrative where we see, like Eringfield’s dystopian/utopian views (2021), that there is imagined possibility, hope and also cynicism and challenge. We have attempted to bring this together into a single narrative with clear and concise themes. When we came to write this analysis, however, we worried that in our attempt to create a narrative we could in fact risk masking the genuine differences between the experiences, perceptions, and voices of

our participants. This was particularly true in relation to the final meeting, and the wide range of different futures for Learning & Teaching expressed by our participants.

Elsewhere (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2022) we have explored the different storyboards in a playful way, using them to help us reflect on the role of the Academic Developer. Here, we seek to add meaning by delving into the specific ‘happy ever afters’ in more depth. We will consider 5 such endings: they were all female, non-UK and mid-career colleagues. The depth and breadth of their teaching experiences in their current and previous non-UK contexts made these stories rich ones to explore. We were keen to focus on our female stories, partly because of the increased negative impact that had been reported for female academics (Smith & Watchorn, 2020) but also as informed by the recent work by Gravett et al. (2021), who draw on the feminist Donna Haraway’s notion of ‘response-ability’ to highlight the role of relational pedagogies in higher education at this time. There also seemed to be something significant about our 5 stories recounted by colleagues who were not originally from the UK. We believed there was something powerful in their intercultural readings of the ‘system’ of higher education itself that comes out in all their stories and that also deepens their perspectives. Their outsider status (even if from a long time ago) means that they knew what it was like elsewhere and their observations were not framed through the shock of experiencing a new learning and teaching system for the first time, unlike other UK colleagues who had never known anything else.

*Ella*

At her final meeting Ella expressed satisfaction; that her experience and the student feedback had shown that she had done an excellent job teaching online. She felt the structure of online learning suited her approach, as had the removal of seminars. Looking forward she wondered how different the experience would be if she had to tweak or develop an existing module, rather than build one from scratch. There had been times that Ella felt she wanted to ‘wrap things up’ in the live sessions, so she could get back to planning the next stage of the module. Two further points came out clearly. First, Ella hoped that the structured learning of her online module pushed back on the ‘cherry-picking’ approach she felt many students had, who just focussed narrowly on what was needed to pass the module. Online learning and the pre-requisites / locked pages approach had, she hoped, shown students that full-time education is time consuming and involves significant effort and thought. Second, Ella was frustrated with the value and emphasis placed on some student feedback. She worried that students were being seen as experts, at the expense of the professional expertise of the academic. Ella was frustrated that her modules had been called too good, too demanding or overwhelming. At postgraduate level this, argued Ella, is to be expected – indeed this superior product was what the University had promised its students.

*Amelia*

At her final meeting Amelia claimed the shift online led to a way of working ‘more intense than I’ve ever known’. The teaching had been student-centred and much had been achieved in a time of crisis. Ameila was worried, however, about the future for Higher Education. Online learning carried, for her, a risk that things would become ‘superficial’: as her modules were structured and ordered but much faster and less

engaging than when teaching face-to-face. Her experience of the module assessments had increased this worry. Students had produced acceptable work, but it had lacked critical comment and reflection. Amelia was concerned that the signposting, structure and handholding of the online environment threatened to diminish Higher Education – specifically in terms of independent learning and 'intellectual curiosity'. On a more positive note, Amelia ended by praising her colleagues for the practical and emotional support they had offered each other through the pandemic.

*Kelly*

Kelly felt her hard work and focus on the design for student engagement has been rewarded in both student feedback, admiration of her colleagues and in the academic achievements of many of her students. For the first time she felt that she could offer her students something her more charismatic and maverick colleagues cannot: the clarity of her design. Kelly's approach to student engagement could be seen a problem-solving exercise, executed with commitment and skill. Her joy in the 'creative practice' of designing lectures for online consumption also changed her relationship with her colleagues, many of whom turned to her for support and help. Kelly recognised, however, that this happy ending was set against a backdrop of perfectionism and impossible pressure on herself which was unsustainable.

*Isa*

At mid-semester Isa had been frustrated with the lack of student engagement not just in her own teaching but across the programme. Isa could track participation and engagement with online materials but struggled to translate this into meaningful and active engagement. This tension was felt in synchronous sessions too: of regular seminars of 26 students, no-one had their camera on and only 1 student spoke. Isa reflected, as an international teacher, on the cultural context that made it so hard for these students to participate actively in seminars. These feelings of frustration and despair grew to the extent that by the end of the semester, Isla reported that she 'didn't have the same sense of satisfaction with my teaching that I usually do.' By the final stages of the semester, Isa had nevertheless developed strategies to address the issue of student engagement. She had worked with a small group of (engaged) students to co-create materials. This use of student partnership enabled her to work more closely with her students and find out what motivates them, what engagement looks like for them rather than basing it on her own experiences. It was also a way of finding agency in her role in a challenging situation. Isa used the tensions around student engagement in the online space to prompt a programme-wide discussion about learning and teaching.

*Francis*

Francis expressed frustration when students weren't completing the online tasks and discussion boards and even more it was hard to gauge their engagement. This frustration was heightened by her feeling that she was increasing her work and preparation times and yet there had been no increase in her students' engagement with office hours. She felt increasingly powerlessness: 'I'm a tool and students have a responsibility to use me – they have to take ownership.' At the final meeting Francis expressed a desire to return to campus and an awareness that she is not alone in this feeling as 'the students feel lonely and would like face to face teaching on campus'.

Above all, Francis was tired with the online approach to learning and teaching and wanted to return to the pre-pandemic norm: ‘I don’t like to prepare things that are new’.

*So what do we get from these different endings?*

Our two specific research questions were:

(1) How did staff perceptions of Student Engagement develop or change during Autumn 2020?
(2) How did staff learning and other factors shape staff perceptions of Student Engagement during this period?

What was clear was that our original questions, which sought to explore student engagement, had taught us a lot more about staff engagement (or lack thereof). Previous studies have established a close link between student and staff engagement: whether through partnership work (Curran, 2017), positive staff-student relationships (Dicker et al., 2019), as well as highlighting the need for 'slow strategies' for this engagement to work (Thorogood et al., 2018). As Markwell (2007, p.13-14) points out, staff engagement can be seen as component part of student engagement:

> [We need to encourage lecturers in] finding ways to encourage interaction in large classes as well as in small, and encouraging, even requiring, students to study in groups, and using feedback to encourage engagement; academics finding ways to urge and to stimulate students to work to master thoroughly the material they are studying – to understand fundamental principles, and not simply to memorise the details; academics finding ways that will engage and excite students through connecting their research with their teaching; staff taking part in the wider student life of the university, supporting extracurricular activities and so on […] This means, of course, that student engagement requires staff engagement.

In our study, much of the discussion in the interviews was actually on the experience for the individual staff member – their role, their identity, their emotions, their practice. The students were often secondary in the discussion. This is perhaps inevitable given the nature of the research and the storyboard itself. Our research bore witness to the realisation that the role of being a teacher in Higher Education was changing, as indeed might be the very nature of Higher Education itself. Our deeper exploration in this section reveals a range of emotions and opinions on this topic from our participants; from excitement and hope about the changes made through to fear (perhaps even loathing) about the future of Higher Education and the role of the student voice. This suggests that student engagement cannot be considered in isolation from, or without awareness of, staff engagement in learning & teaching.

When students were mentioned, it was often in passing and in the plural - which created an ‘othering’ and implied that in fact the shift in time and space engendered by this online teaching needed deeper exploration. Inspired by the readings of Gravett, we felt that there was something about ‘mattering’ (Gravett et al., 2021) that could help

us understand some of the tensions and ambiguities coming out in the storyboards. Moreover:

> One of the many unfolding impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic is that the crisis has exposed institutions as characterised by fluidity and flux, and the sudden move to emergency remote teaching has created an opening for a more nuanced conception of where and when students belong. Engaging a breadth of temporal and spatial concepts, we have reimagined belonging as situated, fluid and sociomaterially constituted. Crucially, such a conceptualisation offers us new insights for our practice, enabling us to think differently about the ways we support students to engage and to belong, both online and offline. (Gravett & Ajjawai, 2022, p. 8)

We propose that replacing the word 'students' above with the word 'staff' would be equally relevant. For staff to engage, we need to think differently about where and when *they* belong, and what matters to them and their experiences.

In fact, what our stories brought out was what had been lurking in between and across our conversations for a long time: a sense of unease with student 'power' and the need to keep students 'happy'; a growing disconnect between staff and student expectations of learning and of what it means to be at university and an ever-present tension about the agency and identity of what being a teacher in Higher Education means. As Bengtsen & Barrnett (2017) outline; we needed to explore the 'darkness' of higher education and the pandemic gave us an opportunity to do just that.

*Where does this take us?*

The question then moves towards teaching, or more explicitly, teaching identities. The tensions that come out most strongly across all our 5 endings reveal an inner struggle with *what it means to teach.* The pandemic has shed a light on these tensions, which arguably existed anyway, between the act of teaching and the challenges that entails and how that plays out for academics.

In an influential paper Biesta (2013) argues that there is a radical difference *learning from* as opposed to *being taught by* someone. Learning from a teacher, in this way of thinking, is using the teacher as a resource, like a book or the internet. This means students have (at least some) control of what they learn, when, and how they do it. This places the teacher in the role of a facilitator of learning. In contrast, argues Biesta, 'being taught by' a teacher would involve taking someone beyond their zone or scope of understanding. This could involve revelation or insight into something new (and possibly difficult) for a student. Indeed, continues Biesta, if teaching is to have a meaning beyond mere facilitation of learning it must be understood 'as something that comes from the *outside* and brings something *radically new*' (2013, p.456). And it is from the outside that the real power and transformative aspect of teaching is to be found. Biesta warns against 'constructivist common sense' in thinking that teachers are merely there to facilitate learning rather than teach, that the teacher is there:

> to make the learning process as smooth and enjoyable as possible, who will not ask difficult questions or introduce difficult knowledge, in the hope that students will leave as satisfied customers. (Biesta 2013, p,459)

This resonates with our participant's worries: Isa and Francis' frustration with their students, Ella's annoyance with the importance placed on student voice over her

professional expertise, and Amelia's worry that the intellectual curiosity of Higher Education was diminished in the online setting. The move online had exacerbated such worries over the move to facilitation of learning as opposed to teaching. Perhaps the focus on moving resources online and ensuring student access to those resources, however necessary and well-intentioned, encouraged the view of students-as-customers who needed to be entertained. As Biesta himself has recently said (Peters et al. 2022, p.747), a university should be a place where students are encouraged to look beyond the obvious, perhaps to things they weren't looking for because they 'may not even be aware' they could be looking for it.

In a way, our research questions remain unanswered as we are left exploring instead what staff perceptions are of teaching in a pandemic. Perhaps this is in fact the question that our findings gave us. Or, rather, what are staff perceptions of teaching? As staff grapple with what it means to teach their students with all their needs and expectations, the tensions that we see emerge above often come down to a lack of agency not just about what they teach but about how they teach, and increasingly where they teach. For us, one of the most important ideas our research is the sense that we need to get back our agency as teachers and to own those practices. In our desire to focus on our students, we cannot forget our teachers – we all matter.

## Conclusion

By exploring staff perceptions of student engagement through a storyboarding technique, we have surfaced the stories of staff at this time, but also their hopes and fears about what they can do as teachers. The limitations of the role in our current HE institutions in the UK and the need to respond to the increasingly diverse needs of our students has arguably led to the disempowerment – and disenchantment – of our teachers in universities.

Returning to the topic of student engagement with which we started: this study has confirmed the central role of staff engagement as a component part of student engagement. In revealing just how unsettling and impactful the pandemic teaching experience was on our staff participants, we have shown how the move from teaching to the facilitation of learning seems to have been accelerated by this process. We have questioned whether this something to celebrate or, rather, be wary of.

For us, our happy ending would be the possibility to explore further with staff who they are as teachers, and how they can develop relationships with their students not as consumers, but to spark genuine intellectual curiosity. Perhaps the task for us, as academic developers, is to support colleagues' understanding of who they are as teachers, help them be more aware of the context (which is often and increasingly complex) in which they teach, and also, crucially, of their agency and value as teachers.

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