'Student engagement' and the tyranny of participation

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Student engagement in higher education has tended to be discussed in mainstream discourses by invoking typologies, seeking to place students into categories and focusing on the importance of 'participation'. I will give a critique of these ideologically loaded and normative constructs and their inherent contradictions, proposing an alternative framing drawing on sociomateriality. This framing, I will argue, allows us to explore the complexities of day-to-day practices, acknowledging the centrality of texts and meaning-making in 'being a student'. Referring to a longitudinal multimodal journaling study, I will argue that contemporary student engagement and sites of learning are constantly emergent, contingent and restless – not only transgressing the mainstream constructs mentioned above but also raising fundamental questions about apparently 'common-sense' binaries such as digital/ material, public/private and device/author. I will suggest implications in terms of research and understanding of the day-to-day unfolding of higher education as situated social practice.

Keywords: student engagement; sociomateriality; Actor–Network Theory; textual practices; academic literacies

Introduction

The term 'student engagement' has become ubiquitous in mainstream discourses concerning higher education in the UK and beyond in recent years, both in educational research and also in policy. It has become the guiding concept underpinning national student surveys in the USA, the UK and Australasia. [See Kuh (2009) for a historical overview of the construct in the US context, Kandiko (2008) for a comparison of the US and Canadian, and Coates (2010) for background on the Australasian survey.] The term is used to denote a desirable set of practices and orientations in students, which ought to be worked towards or encouraged in order for higher education to be successful, as such it has enormous influence in the sector. It is defined in a recent UK Higher Education Academy review as follows:

Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution. (Trowler 2010, 3)

Intriguingly, it might be argued that this is not only seen as desirable, but is in fact longed for by the sector – suggested by this remark made by Trowler (2010):

With higher education institutions facing increasingly straitened economic conditions, attracting and retaining students, satisfying and developing them and ensuring they graduate to become successful, productive citizens matters more than ever ... what students bring to higher education,

or where they study, matters less to their success and development than what they do during their time as a student. If student engagement can deliver on its promises, it could hold the magic wand making all of this possible. (2)

This remark and the prevalence of the concept in contemporary discourse suggest that it has taken important symbolic significance in terms of how the future of higher education is envisaged.

However, as Kahn (2013) points out, it is a concept which is weakly theorised in the literature. This paper will seek to interrogate the concept in order to deepen understanding of how the term operates, and how it might be used in a way which more closely corresponds to the complexity of everyday student practice.

The concept will be considered as an ideology, in a section which will consider the explicit and implicit values, subject positions and practices which are underscored by an emphasis on 'student engagement'. I will argue that the notion often relies on typological categories which tend to posit the individual as the primary site of student engagement. The implications of this viewpoint will be discussed, with a critique of mainstream humanist assumptions in higher education and the concurrent assumptions made about the nature of student agency. The argument will be made that in 'student engagement' there is a reification of the notion of 'participation' which – although appearing to support a 'student-centred' ethos – may serve to underscore restrictive, culturally specific and normative notions of what constitutes 'acceptable' student practice. I offer an alternative perspective, which emphasises the central role of meaning-making and textual practices in higher education in terms of both practices and subjectivities. The paper will conclude by arguing for a reframing of student engagement which recognises the sociomaterial and radically distributed nature of human and non-human agency in day-to-day student study practices.

Student engagement as ideology: 'the tyranny of participation?'

Trowler (2010) begins her comprehensive review by defining engagement in opposition of inertia, inactivity, withdrawal and apathy, in contrast with activity. Engagement is seen with reference to Bloom (1956) as consisting of three elements – behavioural, emotional and cognitive (Trowler 2010, 5). Although Trowler resists placing value judgements on student behaviour and interactions, this is arguably implicit in the way that student engagement is defined in the field. She quotes Coates (2007), who characterises the features of engagement as:

> . active and collaborative learning;
>
> . participation in challenging academic activities;
>
> . formative communication with academic staff;

. involvement in enriching educational experiences; and

. feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities.
(122)

This definition is a key one, as it forms the basis of the US, Canadian and Australasian national student surveys which investigate student behaviour and orientations. Trowler discusses the relationship between ideologies of learning and implications for engagement (with reference to Trowler 1998), arguing that a 'traditional' conception of education would expect students to engage primarily with the content or focus of study, while in contrast a perspective based on 'progressivism' would expect an engagement beyond the classroom, in extra-curricular activities. This is a useful reminder of the ideological basis upon which notions of what constitute legitimate and desirable forms of student engagement are founded – the emphasis is on process, activity and interaction as opposed to a focus solely on academic content, which is positioned as retrograde.

Another aspect of the literature on student engagement reviewed by Trowler is the centrality of typological categories used to define students. Coates (2007) identifies four student engagement styles – 'collaborative', 'intense', 'passive' and 'independent'. Although these are proposed as referring to transient states as opposed to essentialist categories, it still seems significant that they are applied as descriptors to the individual, not practice. These are described fairly neutrally by Coates, with the exception of 'passive', which is characterised as follows:

It is likely that students whose response styles indicate passive styles of engagement rarely participate in the only or general activities and conditions linked to productive learning. (Coates 2007, 134 in Trowler 2010, 13)

This also appears to underline the observations made in the previous section – that active, public and observable forms of participation are favoured in the ideology of student engagement, while behaviour which does not comply with these expectations is interpreted as 'passive', a word with rather negative connotations. I would argue that this tendency can also be observed in related frameworks developed to describe desired graduate attributes – we see here a preponderance of aspirational, qualitative adjectives, suggesting the construction of the graduate as a quality-assured 'product'. Crucially, these attributes are seen as residing in the individual and amenable to 'development'.

What unites the various elements of 'legitimate' engagement is the focus on activity which is communicative, recordable, public, observable and often communal. In this regard, the type of engagement being encouraged could be characterised as participation of various kinds. I would like to propose that this apparently benign concept – like engagement – has also remained weakly theorised in the field of education and as a result is assumed to be an unproblematic 'good'. However, in the field of development studies, the notion has been critically interrogated. Kothari (2001) challenges the 'orthodoxy of

participation' in this field, arguing that this concept – which is seemingly benign or even 'empowering' to less powerful participants – may in fact coerce individuals into subject positions in service of the ideologies of the more powerful, giving the example of 'participatory action research'. In the case of contemporary higher education, where a 'student-centred' ideology has come to dominate, concomitant notions of the 'non-authoritarian' teacher must also be upheld. This can be seen in the frequently expressed disapproval of practices which might be read as 'teacher-centred' and the widespread claim that 'the lecture is dead' (e.g. Folley 2009). Since the late 1990s, the traditional lecture has been portrayed as problematic and in need of remediation, primarily via student interactivity (e.g. Race 1999). Silent listening and thinking are assumed to be markers of passivity and therefore not indicative of engagement. Related notions such as

 'active learning' may also be seen to act in the service of this ideology, which is apparently benign and almost unassailable as an orthodoxy. However, it might also be read as an underscoring of a particular Western, post-enlightenment fantasy of the 'ideal' student (and teacher) and arguably neoliberal notions of the graduate as a product ready to participate in the 'knowledge society'.

Although complete disengagement from study and educational activities is clearly problematic, there is a risk that the orthodoxy of student engagement may lead to practices which are quiet, private, non-verbal and non-observable becoming bracketed as essentially deviant and in need of remediation – which may relate to the moral panic discourses surrounding student practices which are seen as problematic, such as the pathologisation of 'passive' East Asian classroom behaviour (e.g. Kember 2000). It also raises questions about the status and perceived value of silent listening, private study, individual reading and writing, engaging with other forms of representation and solitary thinking – all of which form the basis of much study practice and still underpin the production of the majority of mainstream pieces of academic work, such as essays. These are arguably regarded in the foregoing ideology as inferior to activities which are observable and public displays of 'participation' – such as group work, extra-curricular activity and public interaction with staff. Here – it could be argued – we see something approaching a fetishisation of the verbal and textual performance of interaction, a 'tyranny of participation' – with an concomitant occlusion of individual practices which are either absent from the model or actively discouraged as retrograde and passive.

In a perceptive and rigorous paper, Kahn (2013) highlights the need for a more theorised understanding of the term 'student engagement'. His critical review points out the ambiguities inherent in mainstream uses of the term and highlights the uncertain and ambiguous nature of higher education learning and study. Drawing on Archer (2003, 2007), he proposes the notion of various categories of 'reflexivity' as a theoretical frame through which student engagement may be viewed, defined as follows:

the regular exercise of mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa (2007, 4). She argues that reflexive deliberation

involves a mental process in which the object under consideration is bent back upon the subject doing the considering, whether through planning, prioritising, imagining, rehearsing, monitoring or so on. (Archer 2007, 4, in Kahn 2013, 2)

This Archerian framework recognises the distributed nature of agency. However, the focus is on the notion of personal agency 'higher levels of interest and ensure that students are more likely to employ strategies for self-regulation' (Kahn 2013, 6). Throughout the literature of student engagement, emphasis is placed on taking responsibility, which arguably serves to reify a set of culturally specific Western post-enlightenment 'virtues', such as individual self-reliance. Engagement is positioned as primarily a cognitive activity, arising out of a mindset of high motivation and determination. The challenge is framed in predominantly cognitive terms: 'when given responsibility to progress a learning project in the face of uncertainty, one immediate response will be for a student to deliberate upon cognitive processes and behaviours that could be employed in order to progress the project' (Kahn 2013, 5).

Archer's reflexivity does acknowledge the importance of the social, with a recognition of the communal nature of learning. However, without discounting the role of motivation and cognitive processes, it is worth pointing out the somewhat abstracted and rarefied nature of this conception, which does not focus particularly on the materially, spatially or temporally situated nature of actual student practices. Implicitly, these are relegated to 'context'. Although the importance of context is acknowledged in this framing, there is a danger that it can be reduced to a backcloth against which agency is played out. The central locus of agency is posited in an explicitly humanist framework. In discussion of Donati (2011), Kahn (2013) argues:

Human qualities are evident where the subjects are reciprocally oriented to one another in a relation, while non-human qualities are present when the sense given to an action is merely functional. He identifies the potential for a distancing of what is human from what is social, and we, in turn, can say that there is similar scope to distance what is human from what is educational. Our conception of the human person has significant scope to affect education. We can say that a student's relation with a learning project, and with peers or tutors associated with that project, becomes less 'human' when conducted on a formulaic basis, in the absence of social relations or when it becomes a focus for debilitating anxiety. (11)

Although this perspective provides a valuable insight into the importance of the relationship between the student and the learning project, I would like to interrogate the way in which the 'human' is placed centre stage, not only here but also more broadly in the literature. Reflecting what may be a seen as a 'common-sense' position which also underpins the assumptions of much educational literature, 'human' here is seen as the wellspring of agency and a bulwark against the non-human, which is portrayed as functional, formulaic and anxiety-provoking. I will return to humanism and the non-human in a later part of the paper, where I will propose an alternative framing which views the non-human in different terms.

Meaning-making and texts

Modes and media of communication carry meanings between streams and flows that make up the texture of the contemporary world, and historically literacy is one of the most important channels through which meanings have crossed space and time. (Kell 2006, 147)

A further related critique of mainstream conceptions of student engagement is that they fail to acknowledge the centrality of meaning-making and textuality to higher education student practices and subjectivities. Although text types, genres and modalities may vary, creating and interacting with forms of representation remain central activities across all disciplinary areas, levels and activities in higher education. The day-to-day business of being a student is saturated with a range of complex textual (including the visual and multimodal) practices, both face-to-face and online. These texts are not merely transactional means of information transfer, but are constitutive of both disciplinary and individual knowledge, and also identities (e.g. Ivanič 1998; Lillis 2001). These practices, particularly those involved in student writing, have been researched in the field of New Literacy Studies (e.g. Lea and Street 1998), but this work has not enjoyed a great deal of influence on mainstream policy or research into higher education.

As Kittler (2004) has argued, the university can be analysed as a 'media system' centred on various forms of meaning-making practices, which have changed across the centuries, but have always formed a central position in how the university is run, and how teaching and learning practices are enacted. In the contemporary period, the university in developed economies is characterised by the ubiquity of digital devices and practices in

the physical spaces of the campus (e.g. Gourlay 2013). Students and academics may engage with a complex range of mobile devices and also more traditional literacy artefacts in order to read and create texts in a broad range of ways, both publicly and privately. It is primarily in this hybrid setting – and in the settings of home and public spaces such as public transportation – that 'student engagement' takes place through engagements with texts of various kinds, and therefore, it is noteworthy that this aspect of student engagement is not more explicitly recognised in the literature.

This rethinking of student engagement might include processes of entextualisation (Silverstein and Urban 1996), where talk is lifted out of an interactional setting such as a lecture and becomes text in the form of lecture notes, or is delivered alongside texts such as PowerPoint slides. Texts in the university – perhaps more markedly than in other contemporary contexts – are constantly on the move, being recontextualised, appropriated and reworked into new interpretative spaces via what has been called text trajectories (e.g. Blommaert 2005; Ehrlich 2012; Kell 2006). However, this central role of textuality had not tended to be acknowledged in mainstream models of participation applied to higher education contexts, as critiques of the limitations of the 'Communities of Practice' model for textual practices and knowledge work were argued (Lea 2005; Gourlay 2011).

Student engagement as sociomaterial practice

Humans, and what they take to be their learning and social process, do not float, distinct, in container-like contexts of education, such a classrooms or community sites that can be conceptualised and dismissed as simply a wash of material stuff and spaces. The things that assemble these contexts, and incidentally the actions and bodies including human ones that are part of these assemblages, are continuously acting upon each other to bring forth and distribute, as well as to obscure and deny, knowledge. (Fenwick, Edwards, and Sawchuk 2011, vii)

As I have argued above, mainstream conceptions of student engagement have placed great emphasis on individual motivation, determination, agency and observable 'participation'. Although the importance of the social and communal has also been recognised (or even reified), the emphasis has remained on the notion of self or group 'regulation'. This perspective, I argue, rests on a strongly humanistic conception of education, which places the putative agentive and free-floating human at the centre, with objects, resources and devices relegated to the status of 'tool', and spatial and temporal dimensions (although recognised as important) regarded as 'context' or backcloths to human action and endeavour. In many respects, this is the mainstream assumption which underpins much educational thought, research and practice. However, in this section, I would like to propose an alternative framework for understanding student engagement.

A strand of theoretical work drawing on notions of the sociomaterial (e.g. Fenwick et al. 2011) has sought to reframe practices in education, placing emphasis on the agency of the non-human in the form of material objects, devices and physical artefacts and settings. This work has developed out of Actor–Network Theory (e.g. Latour 2005), a perspective which challenges the assumed primacy of human agency, and instead argues that social process unfolds in networks composed of human and non-human actors. Non- human actors are conceived of as integral to social process, and as such they are regarded having a form of agency. 'Agency' here is not used as synonymous with intentionality – instead, it is intended to denote the intertwined and indivisible nature of the human and non-human. Viewed through this lens, student engagement would be seen as residing not solely through individual or group struggle for regulation of the 'self', but instead it would be identified in networks of agency distributed not only across groups (as recognised by Archer) but also across networks including non-human actors such as mobile devices, pens, computers, books, electricity and so on. The resources and surroundings of education are seen here not as 'context' but as integrated elements in complex networks which are constantly configured and reconfigured in the flow of day-to-day practice. This framing allows us to theorise student engagement as the fine-grained, micro steps of situated practice, moving away from ideological categories or abstract conceptions to a more fine-grained ethnographically derived sensibility which allows for the qualitative, the messy, the hybrid and the emergent.

Seen via this perspective, textual practices and academic literacies may come into view, not simply as tool use but instead seeing inscription devices as 'artefacts meaningful to

the figured world of literacy' (Bartlett and Holland 2002, 13). In this conception, the emphasis is on material assemblages of human and non-human actors, texts, devices, spaces and mobilities (Gourlay, Hamilton, and Lea 2013), where humans and artefacts are seen as hybrid actors (Holland et al. 1998). As Hayles (2012) put it with reference to the digital:

The more one works with digital technologies ... the more the keyboard comes to seem an extension of one's thoughts rather than an external device on which one types. Embodiment then takes the form of extended cognition, in which human agency and thought are enmeshed within larger networks that extend beyond the desktop computer into the environment. (3)

Leander and Lovorn (2006) make a similar point with specific reference to texts in particular:

Removing the agency of texts and tools in formalising movements risks romanticising the practices as well as the humans in them; focusing uniquely on the texts and tools lapses into naïve formalism or techno-centrism. (301)

An example of this can be seen from a research project which investigated day-to-day student engagements with technologies in higher education (Gourlay and Oliver 2013). In this study, students were given iPod touch devices and asked to document their practices over a one-year period, with a series of interviews to investigate their experiences and perspectives. Juan produced the following diagram to represent his engagement in writing an essay:

In sociomaterial terms, we see Juan entangled in a complex network of actors which include the library catalogue, Google Scholar, the physical space of the library, books and computers. He also refers to a range of practices – reading, handwriting, organising notes, printing and submitting – all of which are likely to be largely solitary. What is striking in the image is the sheer complexity of the micro-practices, most of which took place entirely apart from the arenas described earlier in this paper as the desired sites of ideal 'student engagement', involving public interaction and forms of observable 'participation'. Instead, the majority of the steps taken appear to have been textual, private, not normally amenable to direct observation and closely intertwined with the sociomaterial networks of particular spaces. Juan depicts a series of interlocking networks of practice,

Producing Academic texts (2)
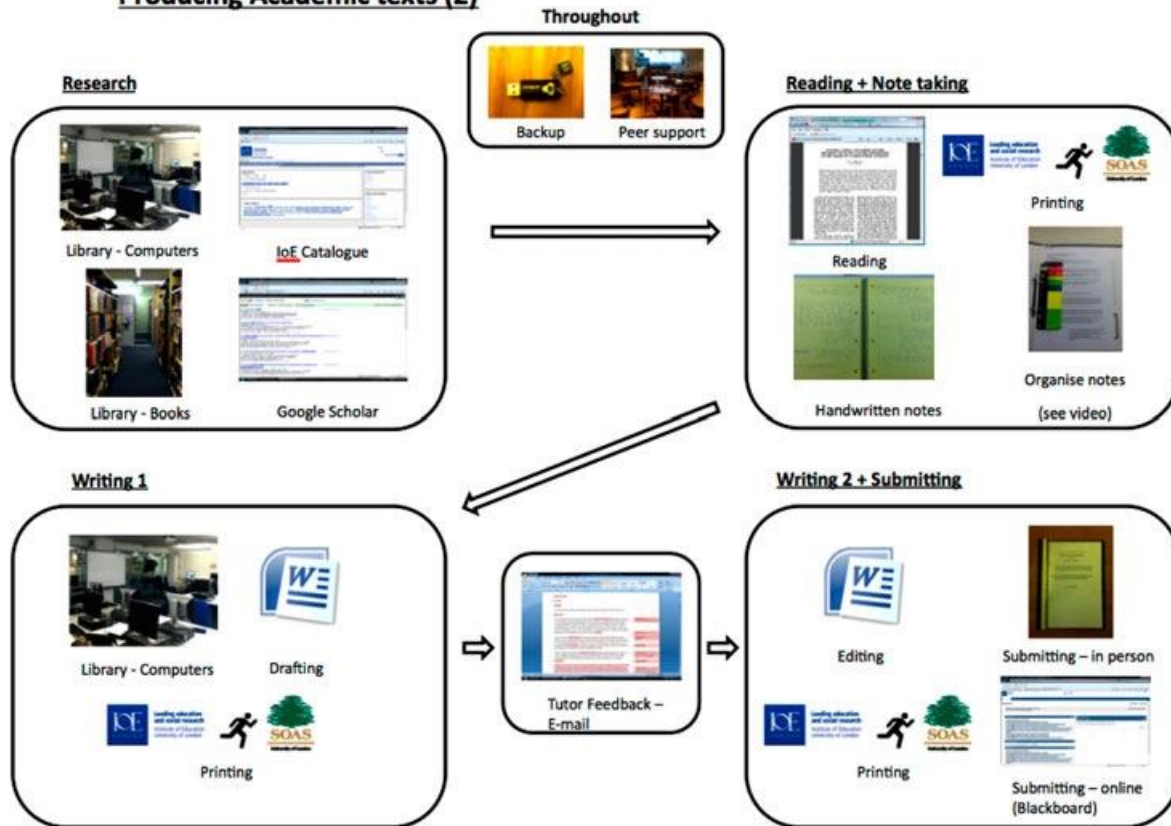
which in a sociomaterial framing would be seen to enrol both human and non-human actors in the form of devices, spaces and artefacts.

This is one snapshot of student engagement and clearly in this regard cannot be used as the basis of strong empirical claims – although the findings of this project were consistent with the specific analysis offered here (Gourlay and Oliver 2013). It could be argued that these types of fine-grained, qualitative, sociomaterial insights generate implications for how we conceptualise student engagement – reading and essay writing are key activities for the vast majority of students, and how this is enacted in terms of practices arguably should not be elided in accounts of student engagement. Reading, writing and textual practices in general are acts of communication across time and space, and as such they are inherently communicative and dialogic – however, the mainstream conceptions of desired 'student engagement' arguably threatens to occlude or even pathologise these practices as either 'passive' or insufficiently 'active' and participatory. As such, they may be dismissed as deficient through not exhibiting the range of practices valorised by those discourses of observable participation – despite being central to study practices and academic work, alongside more observable forms of interaction.

The emphasis here is on what students do, as opposed to what they ought to do – and in this respect the focus is somewhat different from work on student engagement which

seeks to change behaviours or encourage certain practices – and much of that work is likely to be highly useful and relevant to encouraging student success. However, I would conclude that these far-reaching policies and influential frameworks must be interrogated and should be based on a fine-grained qualitative understanding of student practices. In this respect, I would argue that it is incumbent on the field of higher education studies to investigate the nature of actual day-to-day student practices – in particular those which are hidden, textual and private, in order to gain a fuller picture of forms of engagement which are under-researched, occluded from view – or as I have argued – regarded as deviant due to dominant discourses of 'participation' and 'active learning'. In pursuing this strand of work, we might apprehend the radically distributed nature of agency in these sociomaterial networks of practice, in order to avoid an uncritical, humanist-dominated discursive collapse into what might be termed the 'tyranny of participation'.

Discussion

In this paper, I have argued that mainstream conceptions of student engagement emphasise practices which are observable, verbal, communal and indicative of 'participation', and that private, silent, unobserved and solitary practices may be pathologised or rendered invisible – or in a sense unknowable – as a result, despite being central to student engagement. I have proposed that as a result textuality, although central to the university as a media system, is elided by this model. The insights of Archer's work as developed by Kahn have endowed the field with a greater sense of theoretical purchase on the concept, with a recognition of the complexities of engagement and the social nature of it. However, I have argued that work in this field falls short of theorising the type of practices elided by the dominant notions of what student engagement should consist of. I have proposed a further step beyond Archer's recognition of distributed agency – extending not only to the social but also to the sociomaterial, by acknowledging the presence of non-human actors in the flow of education practices. Using textuality as an example, this perspective allows the complex and often occluded nature of these practices to emerge and be theorised in the hybrid context of the digital university, where textual practices are increasingly mobile and fluid. This standpoint destabilises 'common-sense' binaries such as user/device, author/text and practice/context and forces us to consider a radical reframing of how we conceptualise agency in higher education and consequently the nature of 'student engagement'.

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