

## Student engagement as the promise of agency: frames, domains and technologies of student agency in institutional learning and teaching strategies (0202)

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In higher education discourse the term 'student engagement' is recognised as having a wide application (Trowler 2010). The potential breadth of the definition leads to the argument that student engagement is a fuzzy concept, or a 'trendy' buzzword (Vuori 2014). Certainly the term is not used systematically in policy and accounts of practice (Dunne & Owen 2013) and is weakly theorized in the literature (Kahn 2013). Student engagement approached as a broad church can accommodate a range of political paradigms for higher education with which students hold different positions and forms of agency. The neoliberal market-oriented paradigm that is the predominant model promoted by national policymakers (BIS 2011) is concerned with the ways that higher education produces products of economic value and promotes competition between institutions enabled and fuelled by the publication of various forms of performance data, and tends to position the student as a discerning consumer (Naidoo et al. 2011). An alternative paradigm aims to position students as 'partners' in higher education, working alongside academics to understand, and develop, learning and teaching and the mission and purpose of universities (Bovill 2013; Bovill et al. 2011; Cook Sather 2013; Cook Sather et al. 2014; National Union of Students 2012).

Efforts to systematise student engagement have acknowledged that the construct is multi-dimensional and can have no fixed and universal meaning. It takes place in specific geographical and socio-political contexts, it has a temporal dimension in terms of causes and effects and it produces multiple outcomes including learning, curriculum and community (Kahu 2013; Ashwin & McVitty 2015). Closer attention should be paid to the meanings of student engagement *in situ* rather than at the conceptual level, enabling a focus on the specifics of the socio-political context, the educational cultural expectations, beliefs and structures that may be in place relating to students' appropriate role and access to power, and the questions of which forms of engagement are legitimised and which marginalised within different higher education cultures and which students may be enabled to engage or prevented from engaging. All forms of student engagement appear to hold out to students the promise of agency, while not all forms necessarily deliver, relying instead on co-opting students into state or institutional agendas. As such, the lens of agency offers a new way of critically assessing student engagement in context. Institutional learning and teaching strategies offer one way of evaluating the discursive positioning of students within institutional cultures and practices of learning and teaching.

A search of the uses of the idea of student agency in education research – both schools and higher education – reveals that student agency is typically associated with change processes. These can be applied to the self as in the development of one's identity as a learner, or a participant in a learning community, or to the

wider educational environment or the world outside oneself. There are a range of potential domains for student agency and technologies that can be adopted to support and enable students to exercise their agency. The paper posits that for students to meaningfully exercise agency there must be some alignment between the way that students are discursively and culturally positioned as agents in their higher education context eg as consumers, as partners, as leaders, as engaged learners etc – and the domains and technologies of agency that are afforded them.

Analysis of 58 current and publicly-available learning and teaching strategies from a diverse range of higher education institutions (comprising research-intensive, modern and specialist) reveals a consistent framework in which students are positioned as consumers of a learning experience, and expected to provide feedback to inform the continued provision of that learning experience to future student consumers. However, there is also close alignment between the positioning of students as effective learners and the affording of student agency in the domains of personal learning and development, a frame that recognises students' moral agency and autonomy and approaches them as subjects in development with particular learning goals. However, the technologies associated with these domains of agency appear somewhat underdeveloped and are closely tied to the notion of students as a future workforce or being equipped with specific pre-determined attributes, which may undermine the force of the recognition of students' agency over their own learning journey. Notions of student agency in the wider learning environment or community suggest a potential alignment between students positioning as partners or co-producers and the expectation of student agency to affect the wider learning environment, but there are significant tensions here in that the learning environment is approached in very general terms and it is rarely explained how that partnership will be implemented.

This paper contributes to higher education research in two ways: first, it posits an analytical framework for critical judgements of student engagement in specific contexts based on the extent to which students are afforded meaningful agency. Second, it suggests area for development in learning and teaching strategy to create conditions for student to exercise agency, particularly in extending and refining the domains and technologies of student agency.

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