

The 'learnification' of student engagement. (0332)

Lesley Gourlay

UCL Institute of Education, UK

The term 'student engagement' has become ubiquitous in mainstream discourses internationally, and forms the basis for assessment of higher education institutions via national student surveys in the US, UK and Australasia (See Kuh 2009, Kandiko 2008, and Coates 2010). The term is broadly used to refer to practices, activities and orientations in students which are regarded as 'a good thing', and therefore should be encouraged in order for higher education to be successful - as such it has come to wield enormous influence as a construct in the sector. However, as Kahn (2013) points out, it is a concept which is weakly theorised in the literature. Coates's (2007: 122) definition identifies specific instantiations of what she sees as student engagement:

- . 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.

These types of activity foreground the 'active' and 'collaborative' through activities such as 'involvement', 'communication' and 'participation'. Although these forms of engagement may be important and valuable, it is striking that the emphasis throughout is on *engagement with others* as the primary site for the demonstration of student engagement.

Trowler (2010) characterizes approaches which inculcate this type of engagement as 'progressive', which is contrasted with 'traditional' approaches, where the latter are described as overly concerned with subject content. Here we see a binary emerging - with the notion of higher education focused on content being held up as retrograde, flawed, and antithetical to 'student engagement'.

Arguably then, one of the effects of this emphasis on student interaction is an 'anti-teaching' stance which views the demonstration of academic expertise as inherently repressive and hierarchical. The implicit ideology is that 'learning' will arise primarily via interaction between students, unsullied but the influence of academic teaching or input. Teaching - like the lecture - begins to be a 'dirty word' (e.g. Folley 2009). This shift may initially appear radical, inclusive, and democratizing, but on closer inspection could equally be read as an attack on the relative autonomy of the academy, a failure of responsibility on the part of policy makers - and if adhered to unchallenged - also the sector. Academics are told that they should 'facilitate learning' and should not teach, and that content or input is secondary to student interaction. The intellectual content of courses and the knowledge of academics is therefore downplayed, and the primary and most valued site of learning is increasingly viewed as the interaction between students in contexts amenable to observation, or even surveillance. This apparently benign discourse 'wears the clothes' of progressivism, but could be accused of offloading the responsibility onto the students and indirectly reinforcing the marketised view that the student carries sole responsibility for their learning, as a customer who makes a financial investment for personal gain. In a policy environment such the present on in the UK and beyond where assessment of 'teaching excellence' is likely to

lead to far-reaching financial and reputational consequences for students, academics and institutions, this standpoint calls for rigorous and sustained scrutiny.

The philosopher of education Gert Biesta has identified a parallel trend in schooling towards what he calls 'learnification' – what he posits as a reduction of our conception of education to questions of *learning* (Biesta 2010). He also raises concerns about what he calls 'the disappearance of teaching and the concomitant disappearance of the teacher' (Biesta 2012, 35), which has been replaced by a focus on *facilitation*. He argues that this conception arises from an over-simplistic binary between 'conservative' and 'progressive' education. In this move, the teacher is replaced by the child as the 'centre' of education. Biesta responds by arguing for a reinstatement of content, purpose and relationships with teachers, and also for a reclamation of the role and value of teaching and teachers within a progressive model of education. This presentation will draw on Biesta's (2012) critique of the 'language of learning' as an ideology which serves to 'make what really goes on invisible and inaccessible' (Biesta 2012, 38), applying this critical lens to the concept of 'student engagement' in higher education. It will argue that Biesta's call to view teaching as 'practical wisdom' would allow us to reconceive of a progressive model which also recognises the sociomaterially situated and radically-distributed nature of human and nonhuman agency in day-to-day student practices, potentially allowing for a richer and more nuanced range of ways in which we might conceptualise student engagement. In doing so, it will explore implications of this alternative perspective for policy and practice, how it might uncover otherwise hidden student practices, reevaluate practices denigrated as 'passive', and reinstate a progressive model of teaching, intellectualism and expertise in higher education.

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