Setting students and academics free to engage: what do we need to do? (0336)

Caroline Wilson, Christine Broughan
Coventry University, UK

• Part 1 Abstract:

An engaged student body is key to positively influencing student learning gain, a topic currently at the centre of national and international higher education policy attention. One of the challenges to achieving excellence in this field is making the right choice of coordinated activities designed to encourage students to effectively engage in their studies. The challenge is made more difficult by the fact that activity to be categorised as 'student engagement' is still being clarified.

This paper explores the potential for university activity around student engagement to be conceptualised as social marketing activity, and specifically, whether a design guide for social marketers is of potential value as a tool to design and evaluate interventions at any level (university, faculty, school or tutor-led) to promote student engagement.

• Part 2 Outline:

An engaged student body is key to positively influencing student learning gain, which in turn impacts on teaching excellence, a topic currently at the centre of national and international higher education policy attention. There is no shortage of data available to capture the student's view of their university experience and levels of engagement. But while engagement data is routinely monitored and reported to course leaders and HEI management via such vehicles as the United Kingdom Engagement Survey (UKES) of undergraduates, or monitoring of electronic data such as VLE use, what is less clear is its direct link to supporting initiatives to improve learning gain.

There is an abundance of literature that identify factors contributing to learning gain (e.g. Thomson & Douglass, 2009; Bridgeman & Adler,2012). Having identified the factors which impact positively on student performance, a university would want to promote maximum improvement of those factors which it has the opportunity to improve (Dollinger, 2008). Yet it remains a challenge to make the right choice of coordinated activities designed to encourage students to effectively engage in their studies. This challenge is also made more difficult by the fact that activity to be categorised as 'student engagement' is still being clarified (Bryson, 2015).

This paper uses the definition of engagement as the amount of time and effort students devote to academic pursuits and other activities associated with learning and personal development (see Kahu, 2013) - and considers participation in these activities as leading to learning gain.

In this paper we explore the potential for university activity around student engagement to be conceptualised as social marketing activity, and specifically whether a new framework for social marketers is of potential value as a tool to design and evaluate interventions at any level (university, faculty, school or tutor-led) to promote student engagement.

Student engagement, and a perceived acceleration in the level of engagement, requires a change in observable behaviour. Encouragement of the prevalence or incidence of particular behaviours can be defined as a behaviour change intervention (Michie et al., 2011). The Behaviour Change Wheel (BCW) is a design guide for the development of behaviour change interventions. The authors of the BCW propose that it can be applied to "every intervention that has been, or could be developed" (Michie et al., 2011, p. 3).

The BCW has three layers. At its core are three determinants that determine behaviour: capability, opportunity and motivation. The determinants help understand "what needs to change" (Michie et al., 2014, p 57). Surrounding the determinants on the wheel are nine intervention types and seven policy categories.

It is proposed that student feedback about their levels of engagement could be fed into the framework at the determinant level. This reveals what needs to change and is used to identify appropriate interventions and policies which need to be in place to ensure change is effected successfully, whether at course, faculty or institution level, or whether it be focussed on raising attainment of a particular target population of the student body.

To date, the applicability of this relatively new framework to the domain of student behaviour is limited: this paper explores its potential. It does this by assessing whether the BCW comprehensively aligns with the state of student engagement as currently presented in the HE literature. Details of current advocacy and programmes to engender engagement in the HE literature are mapped onto the BCW. This work achieves two things. It firstly allows a prima facie assessment of whether student engagement activity can be readily aligned with the BCW framework. It is argued that answering this question is an essential first step in assisting those involved in planning such interventions to decide whether the BCW might be a useful framework to use. It also highlights omissions and prevalence of activity types in the sector, compared with other sectors where behaviour change is being successfully applied.

With some important and identified caveats, the review conducted in this paper identifies that the BCW appears to be a tool to encourage better specification of interventions and/or a common lexicon for activities that can be rather vaguely described currently in HE guidance. It has also identified strategies which are commonly deployed in behaviour programmes in other sectors which are either absent or not explicitly labelled as such in HE. A key example is modelling as an intervention. This is an approach to behaviour change frequently deployed, for instance, by programmes designed to encourage energy users to adopt efficient behaviour (Wilson & Marselle, 2016), but it is virtually absent from the HE guidance on measures to enhance engagement, and as a result, learning gain. Finally, we use the review to adapt the BCW for use as an aid to designing a holistic student engagement strategy.

This paper opens up three avenues for further work. First, practitioners should trial the use of the BCW in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of a learning gain intervention programme, using

insights about its strengths and limitations highlighted in this paper. Second, further work could assess the usefulness of the BCW against further alternative conceptual models devised to specifically improve student learning activity. Finally, future work could further why some features were under-represented in this review, and the extent to which that may identify avenues for a more holistic response to addressing learning gain.

References

Bryson, C. (2014) Understanding and Developing Student Engagement. SEDA Series. Florence, KY, USA: Taylor and Francis, 2014.

Dollinger, S. J., Matyja, A. M., & Huber, J. L. (2008). Which factors best account for academic success: Those which college students can control or those they cannot? Journal of Research in Personality, 42(4), 872–885. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2007.11.007

Kahu, E. R. (2013). Framing student engagement in higher education. Studies in Higher Education, 38(5), 758–773. http://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.598505

Liu, O. L., Bridgeman, B., & Adler, R. M. (2012). Measuring Learning Outcomes in Higher Education: Motivation Matters. Educational Researcher, 41(9), 352–362. http://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12459679

Michie, S., Atkins, L., & West, R. (2014). The Behaviour Change Wheel: A Guide To Designing Interventions. Silverback Publishing.

Michie, S., van Stralen, M. M., & West, R. (2011). The behaviour change wheel: a new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. Implementation Science : IS, 6(1), 42. http://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-6-42

Thomson, G., & Douglass, J. A. (2009). Decoding Learning Gains: Measuring Outcomes and the Pivotal Role of the Major and Student Backgrounds. Research & Occasional Paper Series: CSHE.5.2009, Center for Studies in Higher Education, University of California, 14. http://www.cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/decoding-learning-gains-measuring-outcomes-and-pivotal-role-major-and-student

Wilson C, & Marselle M. (2016, in press) Insights from Psychology about the design and implementation of energy interventions using the Behaviour Change Wheel. Energy Research & Social Science