

Empowering students to learn collectively: a case study of enabling learning communities in a collegiate education system

Pui Ki Patricia Kwok, Amy Smail, Meg Tait

University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

To enable equitable and meaningful participation for all students in higher education, this paper argues for focusing not only on 'what' students' experiences are, but also 'how' these experiences are shaped. This requires reflecting on the relational dimension of pedagogy, as students co-experience learning academically and socially with others within different communities. A UK university offering collegiate residential education is chosen as a case study. Using unstructured interviews with participatory elements, this 5-year qualitative longitudinal study engages with individual student experience together with their peers and staff in selected disciplinary contexts. Participants are invited to reflexively engage with their formal and informal learning experiences offered by the collegiate education system, and specific pedagogical encounters. These reflections will help to resist conceptualising inclusive education through a set of pre-defined practices. Rather, appreciating relationality and complexities as inherent features of teaching and learning has potentials to enable all students to flourish collectively.

Full paper

Following the progress made in widening access, there is a sector-wide consensus on the need for enabling equitable and meaningful participation for all students in higher education. This is informed by a growing number of studies which have revealed differential experiences associated with students' demographics (e.g. Gutman & Younas, 2024). However, the overt focus on 'what' students' experiences are, but with a limited focus on 'how' these experiences are being shaped, specific to the contextual, systemic factors, has led to a reductive discourse on student belonging. It also detaches these students from their everyday realities.

Additionally, while it is important to understand student belonging through a lens of diversity, belonging to a community involves a sense of connectedness, and it is influenced by one's relation to other members and to specific contexts (Dias-Broens et al., 2024). This points to the need for a nuanced understanding of student experiences not as static, but dynamically (re-)produced or transformed in the everyday pedagogical processes.

When learning is considered as exclusively cognitive (Richardson, 2011), this risks neglecting its relational and affective dimensions. Academically, students learn to unlearn, and develop new learning identities and worldviews to engage with interdisciplinary communities (Alder, 2018; Christie et al., 2016). Socially, students are also learning about their 'being, belonging and becoming' in the wider university communities (Meehan & Howells, 2019). Both processes reflect that students learn not only through cognitive engagement with academic knowledge, but also relational engagement with staff and peers. These can be affectively challenging because interpersonal encounters often involve feelings of ambivalence and discomfort (Gravett & Lygo-Baker, 2025), which may be amplified for those who felt alienated or not 'fitting in' (Reay et al., 2010). Altogether, these multiple dimensions of learning influence students' holistic experiences of higher education.

This paper will present the conceptual approach of a new 5-year qualitative study. It will explore undergraduate pedagogical experiences at a UK university which offers collegiate residential education. This type of education aspires to foster close-knit academic communities through uniting staff and students in an intellectually engrossing atmosphere (Duke, 1996). It is thus structurally well-positioned for exploring how staff and students learn from and with each other. As a highly-selective institution associated with 'elitism' and prestige, the collegiate university has endeavoured to enhance educational experiences for all students through an extensive range of academic and welfare initiatives (Apter, 2016). However, our completed research on factors contributing to awarding gaps found that students had differential experiences of these initiatives, with the teaching and learning space remaining underexplored. Given the paucity of empirical research apart from a study on supervision (Gaston & Duschinsky, 2020), our research fills this gap by engaging with staff and students in selected disciplinary contexts. It explores how the social, relational and affective dimensions of pedagogy all have potentials to enhance student experiences, particularly their sense of collegiality and community.

Aligning with the conceptualisation of pedagogy as a relational process, this study will draw on a longitudinal design to engage with individual student experience together with their peers and staff. Adopting purposefully unstructured interviews, we will first reflect with

participants on their learning experiences in the collegiate education system, both individually and relationally. Rather than pre-determining what pedagogical processes should look like, we seek to capture a wide range of lived experiences across formal and informal educational spaces. Next, to amplify participants' voices and experiences, creative and participatory methods such as diary and photovoice will be used. We will invite staff and students to reflexively engage with their pedagogical encounters, including the perceived potentials and challenges of these encounters for holistic learning, and strategies they value for learning individually and collectively.

Reflecting on the piloting phase, we will invite our audience to consider how the relational dimension of pedagogy can significantly enrich existing debate about inclusion in higher education, which often exists in policy terms with little implication for pedagogy (Koutsouris et al., 2022), or with inclusion defaulting to a set of pre-defined indicators or practices (Filippou et al., 2025). This paper invites us to take a step back from defining inclusion by first critically examining how pedagogical processes holistically influence cognitive, affective, and relational experiences for students in higher education. As opposed to being viewed as challenges, we also argue for appreciating relationality and complexities. These inherent features in teaching and learning, as co-experienced and co-navigated by staff and students, are important to foster learning. Reflecting on these dimensions will help to enable all students not only to access higher education, but to flourish collectively in learning communities.