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The value of a higher education in terms of morphogenesis of student agency: A decade later, graduates look back on the experience of learning (0030)

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In these times of rapid technological change and shifting patterns of global prosperity the value of higher education is once again under examination, particularly the traditional mode of residential full time university education where a student commits themselves to being fully devoted to a programme of undergraduate studies over a period of years. Too often the bases for assessing the value of this higher education are primarily economic, with simple measures of costs and benefits both to the individual and to the nation. Even the language of 'graduateness' has largely been captured by the market, with employability a fundamental concern. In these times, then, a close examination of the student experience of learning is necessary, in order to reassert the broader basis for the value of this experience and to reinterpret it for contemporary times.

Research on the 'student experience of learning' arose in the 1970s and can be considered a response at least in part to the strident questioning of the purposes of higher education that was initiated by the student protests of the 1960s. Starting with grounded qualitative studies that asked critical questions about whether what students experienced matched what the intentions of higher education might be ([Snyder 1971](#); [Becker, Geer, and Hughes 1968](#)), this research was taken up by those with an orientation more towards education psychology, and this work led to the constructs of deep and surface approaches to learning and related frameworks for thinking about the student experience of learning ([Marton, Hounsell, and Entwistle 1984](#)). In the early 21st century it is maybe a good time to rethink how we research the student experience of learning. Many scholars have suggested that these frameworks have now outlived their usefulness and have the limitation of trapping our thinking into a narrowness that is out of step with the complexity and dynamism of contemporary times ([for example, Ashwin 2009](#)).

This article draws on a study which interviewed in depth nearly all students (35) in a class of senior engineering students at a South African university in the early 2000s. For the purposes of the present article, students were contacted again a decade on from this experience and nearly all the original respondents (27) were interviewed telephonically. This longitudinal study allows a new perspective on the student experience of learning, contrasting their experience as reported 'in the moment' with their perspectives as working graduates looking back on this some 10 years later. Preliminary analyses show a new valuing of the intense experience of studying undergraduate engineering, with a particular focus on how these graduates felt they were formed by the experience. Questions still remain however about the potential limitations of a curriculum that allowed for little parallel growth in other areas while being a student. These concerns are countered to some extent by the evidence of broad personal development after graduation.

The theoretical perspective that is brought to bear on these data is somewhat new to student learning research, and laid out in more depth in a recent book (*details removed for blind review*). Here it is argued that Margaret Archer's social realist theory offers a potential perspective on the student that is appropriate to contemporary times – allowing for a layered ontology of being and a model of human agency that encapsulates both the personal and the social. Moreover, this theory is oriented towards social change – to understanding the enablements and constraints for change at both a collective and an individual level. The term 'morphogenesis' is used to represent a change at either the structural, cultural, or agential levels.

Central to the emergence of what Archer terms 'personal identity' is the practice of the 'internal conversation' in which the person weighs up competing concerns and interests and formulates a path ahead, based on what matters to them. This is an important new perspective in thinking about students' choice to study in a particular direction and the work they need to do going forward in reforming this as a direction which fits with their emerging personal identity, given especially that all choices, no less the choice to study in higher education, are made in the absence of full knowledge of all the consequences. The emerging 'social identity' is a space where we can note students moving from the limitations of primary agency which is what we all have by virtue of our birth and its social circumstances, towards corporate agency, in which they are able to collaborate with peers and lecturers towards meeting academic goals.

Of particular significance to a discussion of the values of higher education is Archer's construct of the 'social actor', a person who has achieved a synthesis of personal and social identity in a manner such that they are able to express their own priorities and concerns through these dual identities. In the present study this appears to be a relatively rare achievement in a time-pressured programme such as engineering.

Based on this theoretical framing, drawing in insights from this illustrative empirical study, it becomes possible to reframe a discussion on the value of higher education, centring it on the morphogenesis of student agency. Specifically, we need to ask what changes in both personal and social identity we consider to be desirable outcomes for higher education, and whether indeed we think it is possible for a university programme to aim to produce social actors.

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