

Not Product but Process: Rethinking the Ethics of Student Engagement

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Abstract

Ethics is a markedly under-researched dimension of the expanding field of student engagement. This presentation argues that there is a compelling case for situating ethics at the heart of student engagement practice, theory and policy. The paper utilises empirical case studies, and relates these to a *bricolage* ethics framework inspired by process philosophy, which includes concepts from Aristotle (*phronesis*), Arendt (natality and plurality) and Barad (entanglement). We use this framework to formulate a process notion of ethics-in-action which takes us beyond ethics as a product of institutional Ethics Review Boards, or as an either/or choice between deontological and consequentialist positions. Instead, we argue that rethinking the ethics of student engagement as a process which combines situated ontological becoming, practices of acting well in-relation, and a *bricolage* of varying approaches, offers more flexible theoretical tools to better understand and evaluate the ethical complexities entailed in contemporary student engagement practices.

Outline

Andrew Sayer (2011: 119) writes: 'We are emergent products of specific social relations, in which we continue to act, reproducing or transforming those relations in the process'. Using Sayer's words as a springboard, this paper develops a critical line of thinking which proposes student engagement as an irreducibly ethical enactment involving individual agency, social relationality and educational change, and argues the need to situate ethics at the heart of student engagement practices.

Student engagement means different things at different institutions across the higher education sector (Buckley, 2014) and Gibbs is right to note both the opacity and bagginess of the term 'student engagement' (Gibbs, 2014). Both of these points play out sharply in relation to ethics and student engagement. In our earlier work we noted that, despite the prevalence of the student engagement discourse across the sector, ethical issues are rarely discussed explicitly, specifically or in any detail (Authors' names, 2014). The aim now is to begin to address this neglected area. The approach taken derives from descriptive ethics (Mautner, 2000) which seeks to apply social science understanding to the analysis of ethics. This view contests the 'noun form' of ethics in which ethics are thought of as having a substantive 'content' whether that derives from institutional ethics review boards or a set of universal 'rational' principles or a set of known and tried generalised solutions which can be prescribed by ethics experts.

In contrast, descriptive ethics focuses on ethics as process and enactment. This approach, we argue, refocuses ethics and student engagement as

intimately entwined within the decisions and interactions we participate in every day, and draws attention to student engagement both as a mundane (and, therefore, more significant!) and complex set of interlinked practices. The paper argues that by focusing on the relationality at the heart of every student engagement action we can attend more closely to what matters to individuals and institutions. From this, we can shape ethical behaviour in higher education which 'helps protect individuals, communities and environments, and offers the potential to increase the sum of good in the world' (Israel and Hay, 2006: 2). The paper is grounded in a number of empirical case studies which help illustrate the ethical debates. These include a study of students and healthy eating, a project on student transitions, and the ethical challenges involved in student-to-student peer reviewing processes on an undergraduate module. These are supplemented by other ethical instances. Taken together, the case studies include ethical matters relating to student engagement in teaching and learning, research, and institutional practices.

The paper begins by outlining the dominant discourses within which student engagement is enmeshed, including marketisation, the student as consumer, individualisation, and instrumentalism. It then highlights some of the negative impacts of these discourses on how student engagement practice and ethics are currently framed, including tokenism, risk averse teaching and homogenisation of difference. From this, it makes the argument that doing student engagement properly, honestly and actively requires us to think about ethics intersubjectively, that is through the day-to-day practices of relationality with students. As Levinas says 'to be a "self" is to be responsible before having done anything ... I am not merely the origin of myself, but I am disturbed by the Other' (Levinas, 1996: 94). Being 'disturbed' by the other into thinking differently about our relation with them is, the paper contends, the basis for recasting the ethics of student engagement via notions from Aristotle, Arendt and Barad.

Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*, translated as 'practical wisdom', is based on principles of good judgement and prudence, and helps us decide what particular ethical response is called for in everyday actions. For Aristotle (1953: 150) *phronesis* is the link between the general and the particular, and involves being able 'to deliberate rightly' not only about what is 'good and advantageous to himself [...] but what is conducive to the good life generally'. Putting Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* into practice in student engagement activities, we argue, requires the use of 'practical wisdom' to formulate concrete goals for virtuous action. If we see student engagement as infused with ethics both as immediate action and as an enhancement of the good life, then Aristotle's *phronesis* offers us a way of making ethics practical. It provides a basis for *doing* student engagement as a form of virtue ethics in which ethical integrity is enacted in everyday educational activities such as engaging students via feedback practices or academic tutoring, for example.

We supplement this with Arendt's (1958) notion of action. Arendt's radical argument is that action is made possible by two things: freedom and plurality. For Arendt, freedom is not about having choices but about the capacity to

begin, to start something new. She calls this 'natality' and natality is actualized each time we act. Because each action is a unique and creative event it means we can do things differently, we can do things which are unexpected, improbable and creative. She adds to this the notion of plurality which, she contends, is the human condition – we make things happen together. Student engagement, then, can be re-envisioned as a relational practice of creative emergence, whereby ways of being and becoming together can be ethically enacted through student engagement practices which contest the marketised logics and reductive metrics of the NSS, KIS and league tables.

Barad (2007: 184–187) proposes that: 'What we need is something like an *ethico-onto-epistem-ology* – an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing and being'. According to Barad, everything is entangled with/in everything else, 'we' don't exist as mutually isolated separate beings with determinate boundaries. Instead, everything is entangled and intertwined already. These arguments not only undo the mind/ body, self/other, self/society, human/nature binaries we normally think with, they also provoke an engaged and situated ethics-in-action. This paper takes up Barad's concepts of 'intra-action' and 'entanglement' to re-conceptualise the constitutive nature of student engagement as a dynamic, open-ended becoming in which every intra-action matters. Doing so returns us to Levinas's point which Barad (2007: 178) rephrases: 'ethics cannot be about responding to the other as if the other is the radical outside to the self.'

The paper argues the case for bringing these ethical positions together into a *bricolage* process ethics approach which situates ethics at the heart of student engagement practices.

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