

What about the doubters? Trying to engage all students with their studies

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150-word abstract

This paper explores the relationship between students who have considered withdrawing from their studies (doubters) and theories of student engagement, particularly engagement with academic studies. We will share findings uncovered during the HERE Project (2008 – 2011), part of the “What Works? Student Retention & Success” programme. These include reasons why students doubt in the first place, what helps them to remain and how engaging with their studies is crucial to their retention and success. We will explore some of the institutional changes put in place in response to the HERE Project work, particularly around transition into the first year. These include work on induction, academic course tutorials and a learning analytics student dashboard. Finally we will explore some of the findings from our most recent research into student doubters that strongly support some actions, but also point out some of the problems putting student engagement research into practice.

Longer piece for proceedings (681 words)

For this paper we focus on student’s engagement with their academic studies as described by writers such as Astin (1993) and Kuh et al. (2008). We acknowledge that engagement can also be with quality assurance processes (Trowler & Trowler, 2010) or with the wider student experience (Bryson, 2014), but to keep the paper focused will concentrate only on academic engagement.

Our particular interest is with students who have considered dropping out from university, but subsequently remained (Mackie 2001). We have been looking at the experience of these student doubters since 2008, looking at both reasons why they have considered leaving, but also those factors that helped them to remain (Foster et al, 2012). We found that the academic experience was crucial to students’ decisions to stay or leave.

Since 2008, we have been interested in the experience of students with a less straightforward relationship with the University and their studies. Between 2008 and 2011, staff at Nottingham Trent University led the HERE Project; one of seven contributing to the HEFCE/ Paul Hamlyn Foundation-funded “What Works? Student Retention & Success” programme (Thomas, 2012). Our work, in partnership with Bournemouth University and the University of Bradford focused on students who had considered withdrawing from their courses but ultimately remained. These doubters reported a qualitatively poorer experience than their non-doubting peers: they were less likely to feel part of the course community, reported weaker relationships with their tutors and were less likely to have understood the differences between college and university. Ultimately, as might be expected, they were also more likely to leave early (Foster et al., 2012). In the four student transition surveys conducted between 2009 and 2014, between one third and one quarter of respondents reported that

they had considered withdrawing at some point during their first year (Foster et al, 2014).

Overall, those factors that helped doubters to remain included relationships formed at university, adapting to the learning and teaching habitus, future goals and personal drive. This work contributed to the main "What Works? Student Retention & Success" emphasis on belonging as crucial for retention and success (Thomas, 2012).

In 2011, we were interested to identify what helped students to engage with their studies. Wary of using the word engagement, we asked students what made their studies interesting. Whilst not a perfect synonym, we felt this would be more accessible to the participants and produce more useful answers. Overall, students cited factors such as 'intrinsic subject interest', 'the nature of studying', 'career goals' etc as reasons for finding their subject interesting. However, when responses were coded by doubters and non-doubters it was interesting to note that those students who had never considered leaving placed more emphasis on intrinsic subject interest, whereas doubters placed more emphasis on the learning and teaching experience (Foster et al., 2014). It appears that non-doubters had a stronger sense of personal mission around why they were studying a particular subject whereas doubters perhaps needed more stimulation from the way they were learning.

Nottingham Trent University has sought to respond to these findings by making changes to the learning environment, particularly during the first year. These changes include a greater emphasis on induction, particularly pre-arrival activities (Keenan, 2008) in which students start to engage with their studies before arriving on campus. We also invest heavily in academic tutorials as a means to develop a sense of belonging and explore some of the issues of transition into the first year. From 2014-15 onwards, we will be implementing a student dashboard to help tutors understand more about how individual students are engaging and support relationship building between tutors and students.

This paper will:

- Explore some of the key findings about student doubters
- Visit some of the institutional changes brought about to increase student engagement
- Share some of the findings from the 2014 student survey, some of which appear to show we are moving in the right direction, others that suggest we may need to revisit some of our strategies

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