

Engagement and Alienation amongst Business Undergraduates: A Student Voice. (0140)

Rob Jones, Debbie Jones
Newcastle University, UK

Abstract

Engagement and alienation have emerged as influential themes in research into learning in higher education. Successive authors have sought to deepen and refine the meaning of these constructs. However, it has been noted that the student voice is often absent from these studies leading to calls for greater exploration of student engagement from the student perspective (Trowler, 2010).

This paper reports on the learning experiences of 56 undergraduate Business students. It finds evidence to support existing themes in the literature, concerning student involvement and the influence of staff. However, it also identifies a theme, as yet unexplored, relating to students' perceptions of the relevance of their programme and the impact of those perceptions on levels of engagement and alienation.

Students reported that perceived dissonance between academic and student perspectives can be a powerful source of alienation in vocationally orientated programmes, something that has important implications for educators in these disciplines.

Introduction

The literature on student engagement identifies the importance of student involvement (Astin, 1999; Chickering and Gamson, 1987), the role of interaction between the student and the institutional environment (Krause and Coates, 2008) and the various psycho-social aspects embedded within a student's environment (Kahu, 2013). Discussions of alienation have examined the origins of feelings of alienation (Mann, 2001; Dean and Jolly, 2012) and the role of teaching staff (Bryson and Hand, 2007; Vermeulen and Schmidt, 2008).

However, Trowler (2010) notes that while student engagement has been almost universally viewed as beneficial, there is "a striking absence" in reporting the student voice (p.50). Accordingly she calls for greater exploration of engagement and alienation from the student perspective and the development of a robust body of evidence that "confirm challenge or redefine" (p.50) the concepts.

Research Question and Research Methods

This paper is motivated by a desire to understand students' perceptions of engagement and alienation within the day-to-day of their learning experiences. It responds to Trowler's call by reporting on data gathered in a series of focus groups with 56 final year undergraduate Business students at a research intensive university in the North of England. Focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed, then analysed for relevant themes. Quotes representing the student voice are shown below (in italics).

Analysis of the Data

There was evidence that repeated positive interactions between students and their environment contribute to student engagement but also more widely to student learning (Krause and Coates, 2008).

If I feel like I know loads of people in my class and I'm involved in different activities ... I'm more inclined to get up out of my bed, go to lectures, go to the library and actually be at work, so in the long run it's better for me because I do better in exams.

Similarly positive interactions between staff and students contributed to feelings of belonging (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980; Vermeulen and Schmidt, 2008).

It starts to happen in third year, when lecturers start to recognise you, you realise you've had an impact. It gets you more involved.

Students also reported on how positive experiences in class could elicit feelings of engagement and enthusiasm:

Lecturers who really get involved ... they're really interested in what they're teaching you. And you want to go to those lectures because you think you're actually going to get something out of it.

Meanwhile, delivery which appeared to lack effort or interest could frustrate and alienate. There was a consensus that teaching staff set the tone for a module and how it was experienced by students (Astin, 1999; Bryson and Hand, 2007).

However, the views expressed often reflected a wider context, with many participants expressing the view that professional and career success was a key part of their personal learning project:

A lot of people, and myself slightly included, are coming because they want to get a good job and for that, it's not what you learn, it's that they can see that you've got the first or the 2:1, that gets you through the door.

For these students there was a further dimension to engagement and alienation, going beyond the existing literature. They needed to cross a threshold of confidence that the syllabus had relevance and would help them to prepare for working life. From this perspective, the main purpose of theory was to illuminate understanding of business in practice. Where teaching staff failed to show this link, the required threshold of confidence was not passed contributing to expressions of alienation rather than engagement.

You don't get necessary practical knowledge; you just get hard-to-get knowledge. And there's not one clear way to do something which is fine, I understand that. But you probably don't need 3 years of learning that.

It's interesting, but I feel like it's not like being a doctor or medicine where you're learning really important knowledgeable stuff.

Where the syllabus was felt to be too remote from these broader aims, participants wanted to see a change of emphasis. They expressed a desire for their degree programme to help them with developing a graduate identity, to meet the increasingly demanding requirements of graduate employers (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Knight and Yorke 2003).

I basically chose the degree thinking it was going to be quite practical. Learning something that I feel that I could use when I get out ... Whereas the degree is very literature-based and it's taught by people who are themselves academics rather than necessarily someone who's been there in the business world and done that.

It would be good to have someone that has a real business come in and talk to you about it. It would be really interesting to see in real life how what you're learning applies.

Where participants perceived that the threshold was being met, they expressed feelings of satisfaction, with a sense of making progress (Weil *et al.*, 2001; van Eps *et al.*, 2006).

The last two years was more theory, stuff you wouldn't feel like you're ever going to use, whereas this year I've actually been studying things which has application to the real world. So it's making a lot more sense.

Furthermore once participants had been assured about relevance, they also seemed more willing to engage with less structured, more student-led independent learning.

Everyone is interested in Business, otherwise they wouldn't be on the degree, but now with the dissertation and FA (financial analysis module) you can pick something really specific that you're interested in; something that you chose to do.

Conclusion

This paper finds evidence that students have expectations about the syllabus for vocationally orientated programmes such as Business. Where participants lack confidence in the relevance of the syllabus, it has an impact on the credibility of staff and can result in feelings of alienation.

Conversely, by addressing this issue, teaching staff can engender feelings of engagement and a greater willingness of students to venture into more unfamiliar aspects of learning, including student-led independent learning, contributing to a higher quality learning experience.

References

- Astin, A.W. (1999) Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education, *Journal of College Student Development*, Volume 40 Number 5, pp. 518-529.
- Bryson, C. and Hand, L. (2007) The role of engagement in inspiring teaching and learning, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, Volume 44 Number 4, pp. 349-362.
- Chickering, A.W. and Gamson, Z.F. (1987) Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, Insert to *The Wingspread Journal*, Volume 9 Number 2, pp. 1-11
- Dean, K.L. and Jolly, J.P. (2012) Student Identity, Disengagement, and Learning, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, Volume 11 Number 2, pp. 228-243.
- Hinchliffe, G.W. and Jolly, A. (2011) Graduate identity and employability, *British Educational Research Journal*, Volume 37 Number 4, pp. 563-584.
- Kahu, E.R. (2013) Framing student engagement in higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, Volume 38 Number 5, pp. 758-773.
- Knight, P. T. and Yorke, M. (2003) Employability and Good Learning in Higher Education, *Teaching in Higher Education*, Volume 8 Number 1, pp. 3-16
- Krause, K-L. and Coates, H. (2008) Students' engagement in first year university, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Volume 33 Number 5, pp. 493-505.
- Mann, S. J. (2001) Alternative Perspectives on the Student Experience: alienation and engagement, *Studies in Higher Education*, Volume 26 Number 1, pp. 7-19.
- Pascarella, E.T. and Terenzini, P.T. (1980) Predicting Freshman Persistence and Voluntary Dropout Decisions from a Theoretical Model, *The Journal of Higher Education*, Volume 51 Number 1, pp. 60-75.
- Trowler, V. (2010) Student Engagement Literature Review, The Higher Education Academy, York, UK.
- van Eps, M.A., Cooke, M., Creedy, D.K. and Walker, R. (2006) Student evaluations of a year-long mentorship program: A quality improvement initiative, *Nurse Education Today*, Volume 26 Issue 6, pp. 519-524.
- Vermeulen, L. and Schmidt, H.G. (2008) Learning environment, learning process, academic outcomes and career success of university graduates, *Studies in Higher Education*, Volume 33 Number 4, pp. 431-451.
- Weil, S., Oyelere, P., Yeoh, J. and Firer, C. (2001) A study of students' perceptions of the usefulness of case studies for the development of finance and accounting-related skills and knowledge, *Accounting Education*, Volume 10 Issue 2, pp. 123-146.