

From student engagement to student agency in higher education: conceptual considerations (0307)

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Structured Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a theory of student agency into the scholarship on student engagement and discusses the conceptual links and distinctions between student agency and student engagement.

Drawing from social cognition theory and sociological theories of human agency, student agency is conceptualised as a process of student actions and interactions during studentship, which encompasses variable notions of agentic orientation ("will"), the way students relate to past, present and future in making choices of action and interaction, and of agentic possibility ("power"), that is their perceived power to achieve intended outcomes in a particular context of action and interaction, but also to self-engagement of a critical reflexive kind.

The agentic perspective of student engagement proposes that student behaviour cannot be fully understood solely in terms of socio-structural conditions or psychological factors regardless of which level or unit of analysis of agency is considered and regardless of which temporal proximity of causation is approached (Bandura 2001). A full understanding of student agency indeed requires an integrated causal, but not deterministic system which is sensitive to the different and changing temporalities of students' agentic orientations ("the will to act") and agentic possibilities ("power to achieve intended outcomes"). In other words, the ways in which people understand their own relationship to the past (routine), future (purpose) and present (judgment) make a difference to their actions (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 973).

In line with this definition, the theory of student agency, as outlined in this paper, includes six premises.

1. Student agency is something that individual students or collectives of students develop alone or interacting with other people, materials and ideas within a particular socio-structural and relational context of action.
2. In a given situation, student agency can be stronger or weaker. Students may be not at all agentic depending on the situation.
3. Student agency is temporally embedded and includes students' selective reactivation of past habits of thought and action, students' imaginative generation of possible future selves, and students' capacity to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible choices of action.
4. Student lives are placed and socially developed in contexts of interdependent educational, political, social, economic and cultural conditions that present unique opportunities, constraints and challenges to student agency.
5. Student agency is inherently relational.
6. There are three different modes of student agency: personal, proxy and collective.

This paper aims to move deeper to the micro foundations of students' capacity to act so as to capture both the temporality and the multi-level relational contexts of students' actions and interactions. It is through such an approach that the hope is to better understand how different conditions that shape student agency interact and play out over time and to what effect.