

'Student engagement' and the tyranny of participation (0332)

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The term 'student engagement' has become ubiquitous in mainstream discourses concerning higher education in the UK and beyond and has become a guiding concept underpinning national student surveys in the US, UK and Australasia. (See Kuh 2009, Kandiko 2008, and Coates 2010). The term is used to denote a desirable set of practices and orientations in students which ought to be worked towards or encouraged in order for higher education to be successful, as such it has enormous influence in the sector. The prevalence of the concept in contemporary discourse suggests that it has taken on symbolic significance in terms of how the future of higher education is envisaged. However, as Kahn (2013) points out, it is a concept which is weakly theorised in the literature. This paper will interrogate the concept in order to deepen understanding of how the term operates. I will argue that the notion often relies on typological categories which tend to posit the individual as the primary site of student engagement. The implications of this viewpoint will be discussed, with a critique of mainstream humanist assumptions in higher education and the concurrent assumptions made about the nature of student agency. The argument will be made that in 'student engagement' there is a reification of the notion of 'participation' which - although appearing to support a 'student-centred' ethos, may serve to underscore restrictive, culturally-specific and normative notions of what constitutes 'acceptable' student practice. I will offer an alternative perspective, which emphasises the central

role of meaning-making and textual practices in terms of practices and subjectivities.

Trowler (2010) begins her comprehensive review by defining engagement in opposition of inertia, inactivity, withdrawal and apathy, in contrast with 'activity'. Engagement is seen as consisting of three elements –behavioural, emotional and cognitive (Trowler 2010:5). Trowler discusses the relationship between ideologies of learning and implications for engagement, arguing that a 'traditional' conception of education would expect students to engage primarily with the content or focus of study, while in contrast a perspective based on 'progressivism' would expect an engagement beyond the classroom, in extra-curricular activities. This is a reminder of the ideological basis upon which notions of what constitute legitimate forms of student engagement are founded – the emphasis is on process, activity and interaction as opposed to a focus on academic content, which is positioned as retrograde. Another aspect of the literature on student engagement reviewed by Trowler is the centrality of typological categories used to define students. Coates (2007) identifies four student engagement styles – 'collaborative', 'intense', 'passive' and 'independent'. Although these are proposed as referring to transient states as opposed to essentialist categories, it is significant that they are applied as descriptors to the individual. Active, public and observable forms of participation are favoured in the ideology of student engagement, while behaviour which does not comply with these expectations is interpreted as 'passive'. I will argue that this tendency can also be observed in related frameworks developed to describe desired graduate attributes – we see here a preponderance of aspirational, qualitative adjectives, suggesting the construction of the graduate as a quality-assured 'product'. Crucially, these attributes are seen as residing in the individual and amenable to 'development'.

What unites the various elements of 'legitimate' engagement is the focus on activity which is communicative, recordable, public, observable and often communal. In this regard, the type of engagement being encouraged could be characterised as *participation* of various kinds. I would like to propose that this apparently benign concept - like engagement - has also remained weakly theorised in the field of education, and as a result is assumed to be an unproblematic 'good'. However, in the field of development studies, the notion has been critically interrogated. Kothari (2001) challenges the 'orthodoxy of participation' in this field, arguing that this concept - which is seemingly benign or even 'empowering' to less powerful participants - may in fact coerce individuals into subject positions in service of the ideologies of the more powerful, giving the example of 'participatory action research'. In the case of contemporary higher education, where a 'student centred' ideology has come to dominate, concomitant notions of the 'non-authoritarian' teacher must also be upheld. This can be seen in the frequently expressed disapproval of practices which might be read as 'teacher-centred', and the widespread claim that 'the lecture is dead' (e.g. Folley 2009). Since the late 90s, the traditional lecture has been portrayed as problematic and in need of remediation, primarily via student interactivity. Silent listening and thinking are assumed to be markers of passivity and therefore not indicative of engagement. Related notions such as 'active learning' may also be seen to act in the service of this ideology, which is apparently benign and almost unassailable as an orthodoxy. However, it might also be read as an underscoring of a particular western, post-enlightenment fantasy of the 'ideal' student (and teacher), and arguably neoliberal notions of the graduate as a product ready to participate in the 'knowledge society'. The paper will conclude by arguing for a reframing of student engagement which recognises the sociomaterial and radically

distributed nature of human and nonhuman agency in day-to-day student study practices.

References

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