



**The nature of student
engagement and why it
matters so much.**

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(and Len Hand and Christine Hardy)



Enhancing engagement

Stronger student engagement enhances

- Student learning
- Achievement
- Retention and persistence
- Students having a positive experience in HE
- Our fulfilment and enjoyment as staff!



Conceptions of engagement – the NSSE

- Roots (Pace, 1979: Astin, 1977: Chickering and Gamson, 1987: Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, 2005)
- A focus in USA on active classroom behaviours - (National Student Survey on Engagement) – George Kuh
- Survey used very widely
<http://nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm>
- Over 50 publications
- Measuring engagement - Proxy for quality
- And now the AUSSE and the SASSE



NSSE based on five benchmarks

- Level of academic challenge
- Active and collaborative learning
- Student:staff interaction
- Enriching educational experiences
- Supporting campus environment



Australian perspectives

- Williams' index (1982)
- Focus on first year experience – big surveys in 1994, 1999 and 2004
- Connectedness (McInnis, 1995)
- Multi-dimensional engagement (Krause and Coates, 2008) -7 scales transition; academic; peer; staff; intellectual; online; beyond-class



Similar concepts to engagement

- Belonging (Kember et al, 2001)
- Academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993)
- Involvement (Tinto, 2006)

Strong links to research inter alia on retention, persistence, transition....



Theoretical perspectives

- social cognition (Webber, 2004)
- identity – ‘student selves’ (Horstmanoff and Zimitat, 2003)
- Dubet (1994) student typology (see Jary and Lebeau, 2009)
 - The nature of personal project
 - The degree of integration in university life
 - Level of intellectual engagement with the subject
- social constructivism



Mann (2001) alienating forces

- Performativity
- Culture shock – “outsiders in a foreign land”...other
- Exercise of disciplinary power
- Disempowerment – Marxian ‘exile from the self’



Our take on engagement

- Every student is an individual and different (Haggis, 2004)
- Engagement is a concept which encompasses the perceptions, expectations and experience of *being* a student and the *construction* of being a student in HE (Bryson and Hand, 2007).
- Engagement underpins learning and is the glue that binds it together – both located in *being* and *becoming*. (Fromm, 1977)
- Strong link to intellectual development (Perry, 1970/1999: Baxter Magolda, 1992)



The Student view

- Drawn from a study about their experience as students
- 10 focus groups of Nottingham Business School students
- Original research question was not about engagement!



Student engagement: Poor

- *I do almost little or no work with modules, I don't like – I know you're supposed to do but I find it really hard to motivate myself – when you're sat at home and you've got what you don't like doing, you're not going to do it. [first year student]*
- *When you've got a subject that you're not particularly interested in to begin you then why go to a seminar on the lecture which is so boring... just take the notes off the VLE [first year student]*
- *My first year was an absolute joke, I just didn't go in enough, I didn't do any work. I just didn't go in and I missed everything you needed to know. [second year student]*



Student engagement: False

- *We don't actually get taught how to manage, how to actually do the jobs we are going to be doing, just the academic stuff. [second year student]*
- *Everyone's like ... the mark is important well academic wise its not about what I've learnt anyway it's all about what I get [final year student].*
- *The joyless slog [final year student].*



Student engagement: Staff

- *...it's definitely the lecturer that can really make it interesting or can almost destroy a subject.*
[first year student]
- *They just like doing their thing, they go through what they're going to do, it's not really interesting, they're not actually getting your attention.* [second year student]



Student engagement: Relationships

- *... (but at university) lecturers or seminar tutors don't take the time to know you at all, you're just another number to them that hits you a bit in the first year, so you think why go in, this teacher doesn't care [second year student]*
- *Like I sent her an email cause I couldn't go to her thing, but she was so nasty back [second year student]*



Key influences on engagement

- Student expectations and perceptions – match to the ‘personal project’
- Balances between challenge and appropriate workload
- Degrees of choice, autonomy, risk, and opportunities for growth and enjoyment
- Trust relationships
- Communication and discourse



The latest research

- A longitudinal study of students throughout their degrees
- Examining engagement, expectations, transitions and intellectual development
- Emphasis on context and changing perspective – focus on the individual
- As well as trying out practices and policies...transition projects etc.



A whole new body of literature and ideas....

Analysis rather emergent

Written up the first three interviews

Doing the fifth right now...

Produced interim conference papers – host of issues from this rich evidence



Expectations

- Students ambitious and keen to do well
- But very vague about academic issues – classes and assessment – different but not sure how
- Intended to work really hard, do whatever was necessary
- Appeared ready and willing to be engaged



Social and academic integration

The first year

- Social transition really important – had made friends but not formed relationships with staff...or into the community of practice of discipline
- Academic integration rather minimal – getting by, passing but....
- So some indicators of engagement but not the sort of strong engagement required for intellectual development
- But indications of a transformative second year



Practice and Policy

- Curriculum design – content AND process
- Delivery
- Student involvement and empowerment – the student voice
- Induction and transition
- Assessment
- Enhancing belonging and community



Curriculum, L&T and assessment

- Student centred – active learning/self-regulated learning - Authentic learning experiences (McCune, 2009)
- Enquiry based learning
- Reflection, collaboration, autonomy
- Integrated projects, learning set, study groups, learning journals
- Assessment for learning
- Include fun!



Student involvement and empowerment

- Enabling choice
- Clarity and transparency
- Strong feedback mechanisms – responsiveness
- Students taking responsibility
- Negotiating the curriculum and assessment



Enhancing belonging and community

- Extended induction and transition strategies
- Peer mentoring and support
- Bridging to the social – clubs, common rooms etc
- Staff disposition – welcoming and meeting students half way