

Student Engagement, ‘Learnification’ and the Sociomaterial: Critical Perspectives on Higher Education Policy

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Abstract

The term ‘student engagement’ has become ubiquitous in mainstream discourses concerning higher education in the UK and beyond. The term is used to denote a desirable set of practices and orientations in students which should be worked towards or encouraged in order for teaching in higher education to be deemed successful - as such it has enormous influence in the higher education (HE) as part of a discourse which carries powerful ideological force in the sector. 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 first that the notion often relies on typological categories which tend to posit the individual as the primary site of student engagement, and secondly that this is primarily identified in interlocution or observable interaction. Drawing on the work of Gert Biesta, I will argue that this position reflects a broader trend towards ‘learnification’ in higher education, which positions teaching as problematic and inherently repressive. I seek to build on this critique by arguing for a reframing which recognises the sociomaterial and radically distributed nature of human and nonhuman agency in day-to-day student engagement.

Keywords: Student engagement, posthumanism, learnification, sociomateriality, performativity

Introduction

The term ‘student engagement’ has become ubiquitous in mainstream discourses across the sector and internationally, and forms the basis for assessment of higher education institutions via national student surveys in the US, UK and Australasia (See Kuh, 2009; Kandiko, 2008; Coates, 2010). The term is broadly used to refer to practices, activities and orientations in students which are regarded as ‘a good thing’, and therefore should be encouraged in order for higher education to be successful - as such it has come to wield enormous influence as a construct in the sector. The prevalence of the concept in contemporary educational and policy discourse suggests that it has taken on great significance in terms of how the future of a desired system 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 seek to interrogate the concept in order to deepen understanding of how the term operates, and will also argue that the concept and its application lead to a series of effects which have far-reaching implications for how we may come to see higher education, students and teaching.

‘Engagement with others’ and interactivity

‘Student engagement’ is a very broad and complex concept, and has been deployed for a variety of purposes. It has been instrumental in approaches to important issues of inclusion, diversity and retention in the student body in higher education (see for example Barkley, 2010; Dunne and Owen, 2013; Quaye and Harper, 2015). This paper does not seek to critique the strand of valuable work focusing on these issues, but instead examines how the term has come to

influence the development of higher education policy in relation to the concept of teaching in particular, with a primary focus on the UK setting and relevance to other contexts where similar policies are under development. It is defined in various ways in the literature. Here, Trowler offers a broad definition:

Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution.

(Trowler 2010, 3)

The focus is placed on the investment of ‘time, effort and relevant resources’ by both students and their institutions to optimise the student experience and attain learning outcomes. Although inclusive and implying a joint responsibility, it is problematic that this definition does not clearly express what ‘student engagement’ consists of in terms of practice – instead it is expressed as an orientation and commitment on the part of student and institution, and could be critiqued for lacking precision in its referents. However, Trowler goes on to refer to Coates’ (2007, 122) definition, where he identifies specific instantiations of what she sees as student engagement:

- . active and collaborative learning;
- . participation in challenging academic activities;
- . formative communication with academic staff;
- . involvement in enriching educational experiences; and
- . feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities.

In this section I would like to challenge these proposed instantiations in detail. In the first point, the notion of ‘student engagement’ is situated primarily in a particular form of student activity. It refers to ‘learning’, but emphasizes the need for learning to be ‘active’ and ‘collaborative’. These two concepts are not defined, but arguably in order for ‘learning’ to demonstrate these attributes, the students must show evidence of activity and collaboration. The terms used by Coates imply a need for interaction to take place, in order for ‘active’ and ‘collaborative’ learning to happen. The second point focuses on ‘participation’ in challenging academic activities. Here, the definition is broad, and arguably this could take a very wide range of types of engagement. However, it is worth noting the emphasis on ‘participation’ and ‘activities’ – both words imply joint or shared endeavour. The third point explicitly focuses on ‘formative communication’ with staff - again, the emphasis is on interaction. The following point emphasises ‘involvement’ in ‘educational experiences’. This is also a definition which could cover a broad range of types of engagement, but again the terms used seem to imply a collective form of activity. The final point refers to the extent to which students feel supported by the institution – this seems to extend the notion of engagement to include the student’s perceived relationship to the institution.

These types of activity proposed as student engagement foreground the ‘active’ and ‘collaborative’ through activities such as ‘involvement’, ‘communication’ and ‘participation’. Although these forms of engagement may be important and valuable, and some of the points are defined relatively loosely, it is striking that the emphasis throughout is on *engagement with others* as the primary site for the demonstration of student engagement. Here not only is *engagement with others* valorized, but other forms of engagement are not mentioned. This implies that only *engagement with others* should be viewed as the desirable form of student engagement. This can also be seen in the emphasis on extra-curricular activity as another way

to demonstrate ‘student engagement’. There is a tension inherent in this conception – the emphasis is on the collective and the social, but the onus is on the individual to demonstrate engagement through these activities. Trowler characterizes approaches which inculcate this type of engagement as ‘progressive’, which is contrasted with what she calls ‘traditional’ approaches, where the latter is described as overly concerned with subject content. Here we see a binary emerging - with the notion of higher education focused on content being held up as retrograde, flawed, and antithetical to ‘student engagement’.

The literature also focuses on typological categories of individuals, with Coates (2007) identifying four ‘student engagement styles’. This appears to broaden out what is understood as student engagement – however, these are not described in equally valid. The first of these categories is ‘intense’, which Coates describes in favourable terms as students who are ‘highly involved with university study’; (Coates, 2007, 132-133). Coates also proposes the category of ‘collaborative’, which refers to student who prefer a social approach. He contends that:

High levels of general collaborative engagement reflect students feeling validated within their university communities, particularly by participating in broad beyond-class talent development activities and interacting with staff and other students.

(Coates, 2007, 134)

Again we see a valorization of involvement and interactivity. In contrast, the category of ‘independent’ is described as follows:

An independent style of engagement is characterised by a more academically and less socially orientated approach to study ... Students reporting an independent style of study see themselves

as participants in a supportive learning community. They see staff as being approachable, as responsive to student needs, and as encouraging and legitimating student reflection, and feedback. These students tend to be less likely, however, to work collaboratively with other students within or beyond class, or to be involved in enriching events and activities around campus.

(Coates 2007, 133-134)

Although broadly positive, this definition appears to view these students' reluctance towards collaboration and involvement in (collective) activities as a drawback. Finally, the 'passive' style is described as follows:

It is likely that students whose response styles indicate passive styles of engagement rarely participate in the only or general activities and conditions linked to productive learning.

(Coates, 2007, 134)

The 'passive' student is presented here as problematic, and unlikely to learn. As 'active' has been described in terms of interactivity and engagement with others, implicitly a 'passive' student is one who is not seen to interact or demonstrate sufficient evidence of engagement with others, a student who is reticent or silent may be deemed to be 'passive'.

In policy terms, this emphasis is not a trivial one and has already had wide-reaching normative effects on higher education internationally – particular definition by Coates (2007) has been used to form the basis of the US, Canadian and Australasian national student surveys, the framing and results of which exercise a great deal of influence on higher education strategies

at an institutional level. As the valorisation of these particular forms of student engagement underpins regulatory regimes such as national student surveys, then it follows that universities will seek to demonstrate the prevalence of this type of the desired form of ‘active’ student engagement, and will encourage it in their approaches to pedagogy. The next section will make an argument that this powerful emphasis on *engagement with others* and interactivity (particularly interlocution) as the most valued form of student engagement has a series of effects on higher education in terms how we view students, teaching, and ultimately how we theorise the site of learning and engagement.

Interlocution, silence and invisible practices

As discussed above, valorized student engagement is predominantly described in terms of interactivity in the literature which underpins related assessment regimes and policy. This emphasis is likely then to have an influence on the type of activity which is valued in the face-to-face classroom, and may lead to an over-emphasis on interaction, and in particular interlocution as the primary marker of engagement and teaching excellence (see Gourlay, (2015a) for a fuller exposition of this argument). As we saw above, ‘passive’ student behaviour is regarded as problematic. Therefore, if talk is valued, then it is likely that student silence or reticence in the classroom may be regarded as unacceptable. This can be seen in the pejorative judgments expressed regarding the apparently ‘passive’ classroom behaviour of Asian students (see Kember, (2000)). With digital engagement, this emphasis on observation of engagement can be seen in the rising interest in using ‘learner analytics’ to evaluate engagement (see Ferguson (2012) for overview), which could be regarded as an attempt to observe the previously unobservable, and conflate a greater volume of online interaction with ‘better’ engagement. In digital education, as in face-to-face, this value is replicated with online

reticence viewed pejoratively as ‘lurking’. Again the untraceable and the unobservable may be positioned as ‘passive’ and therefore unengaged, although this assumption has been questioned in the literature (e.g. Paz Dennen, 2008).

A further outcome of a concentration on interlocution is that student engagement which does not offer observable interaction in the classroom or online may also then come to be viewed as less important, and might be rendered ‘invisible’ in discussions about student engagement. This could include solitary, private activities such as reading, writing and other forms of study practices undertaken away from observable and measurable settings – all of which are in fact central to student progress through their programmes of study, and also required for the production of essays and assignments.

Arguably, this type of emphasis in a quality assessment regime may serve to render the lecture theatre as truly a ‘theatre’ in the alternative sense - a pure performance space, a stage upon which symbolic roles demonstrating ‘active’ engagement come to be acted out by students and teachers, while engagement with content, texts and thinking about ideas are relegated to ‘preparation’. Arguably, the apogee of this stance is the ‘flipped classroom’ (e.g. Tucker, 2012), where the teaching is removed from the classroom entirely, and instead content is ‘delivered’ in advance using video lectures, in order to devote all the face-to-face classroom time to student interaction. The title of Tucker’s paper is in itself revealing – ‘The flipped classroom: online instruction at home frees class time for learning’. Here ‘instruction’ is explicitly separated from and excluded from ‘learning’, which it appears in this perspective can only take place via student interaction. I will look at the effect of this emphasis on interaction on our view of teaching in the next section.

'Learnification' and the turn away from teaching

If student interaction is becoming increasingly prized in higher education, then it follows that academics will be encouraged to design pedagogical interventions which are likely maximize this. In the lecture or tutorial, this is likely to take the form of activities involving interlocution via group work, and by maximizing opportunities for verbal interaction more generally. This is inculcated in mainstream academic development with an emphasis on moving away from what is deemed 'traditional', or 'teacher-centred' pedagogy. This emphasis can be also be seen in the UK government's Higher Education Academy 'Professional Standards Framework' for academic staff, which it is stated 'Fosters dynamic approaches to teaching and learning through creativity, innovation and continuous development in diverse academic and/or professional settings' (HEA, 2011). While it is also stated that the framework 'acknowledges the variety and quality of teaching, learning and assessment practices that support and underpin student learning', the need for practice to be 'dynamic' and 'innovative' is explicitly foregrounded.

Once again, this is significant in policy terms as it is the UK national framework used for the professional accreditation of individuals at various stages of their academic careers, and also for the accreditation of continuing professional development courses focused on teaching for academics and staff in associated roles. In practice, if early-career academics do not pay sufficient attention to inculcating this form of 'student engagement' in their observed teaching and written reflection on programmes focused on teaching and learning in higher education, they may be deemed to have fallen short of the criteria. (See Macfarlane and Gourlay, 2009 for an argument that reflective practice is frequently used normatively to underscore these values in higher education academic development). This may also serve to reinforce a desired identity position as a lecturer who inspires students, who encourages debate, who is non-hierarchical

and whose pedagogy is not 'teacher-centred'. These drivers lead to a situation where a relatively narrow band of student behaviour comes to stand as a proxy for teaching 'quality'. This leads to a situation where behaviour which does not conform to this ideal may be either pathologised as 'passive' or rendered 'invisible' and then disregarded, as it is not readily amenable to direct observation.

Arguably then, one of the effects of this emphasis on student interaction is an 'anti-teaching' stance which views the demonstration of academic expertise as inherently repressive and hierarchical (see Gourlay 2015b for discussion of this point in relation to Open Education Resources). As with OERs, the implicit ideology is that learning in higher education is available with minimal or no intervention in the form of academic expertise, and instead the belief is that learning will arise primarily via interaction between students, unsullied but the influence of academic teaching or input. Teaching - like the lecture - begins to be a 'dirty word' (e.g. Folley, 2009). Again, this shift may initially appear radical, inclusive, and democratizing, but on closer inspection could equally be read as an attack on the relative autonomy of the academy, a failure of responsibility on the part of policy makers - and if adhered to unchallenged - also the sector. It might be speculated that this notion has been harnessed in policy to give the impression of placing students 'at the centre' of higher education, while in fact questioning the expertise of academics.

The mainstream orthodoxy of academic development tends to encourage academics to 'facilitate learning', with teaching having become associated with a 'disempowering' ethos (as can be seen in the widespread formulation 'Learning and Teaching'). This is frequently combined with the view that content or input is secondary to student interaction. The intellectual content of courses and the knowledge of academics is therefore downplayed, and

the primary and most valued site of learning is increasingly viewed as the interaction between students in contexts amenable to observation, or even surveillance. Ironically, activities undertaken by students outside of these settings are arguably the most ‘student-centred’ forms of engagement of all, but are not brought into view or valued in this framing. This perspective on what should be seen as desirable ‘student engagement’ in higher education is then arguably both distorted and distorting – and is likely to lead to a series of omissions and negative value judgments about students, academic and institutions. This apparently benign discourse ‘wears the clothes’ of progressivism, but could be critiqued for offloading the responsibility onto the students and indirectly reinforcing the marketised view that the student carries sole responsibility for their learning as a customer who makes a financial investment for personal gain. In a policy environment such the present one in the UK and beyond where assessment of ‘teaching excellence’ is likely to lead to far-reaching financial and reputational consequences for students, academics and institutions, this standpoint calls for rigorous and sustained scrutiny.

The philosopher of education Gert Biesta has identified a parallel trend in schooling towards what he calls ‘learnification’ – what he sees as a reduction of our conception of education to questions of *learning* (Biesta, 2010). He raises concerns about what he calls ‘the disappearance of teaching and the concomitant disappearance of the teacher’ (Biesta, 2012, 35), which has been replaced by a focus on *facilitation of learning*. He argues that this conception arises from an over-simplistic binary between ‘conservative’ and ‘progressive’ education. In this move, the teacher is replaced by the child as the ‘centre’ of education. Biesta responds by arguing for a reinstatement of content, purpose and relationships with teachers, and also for a reclamation of the role and value of teaching and teachers within a progressive model of education. As he puts it:

... the point of education is never that children or students learn, but that they learn *something*, that they learn this for particular *purposes*, and that they learn this from *someone*. The problem with the language of learning and with the wider 'learnification' (Biesta, 2010) of educational discourse is that it makes it far more difficult, if not impossible, to ask the crucial educational questions about *content*, *purpose* and *relationships*. Yet it is in relation to these dimensions, so I wish to suggest, that teaching matters and that teachers should teach and should be allowed to teach.

(Biesta, 2012, 36)

Biesta has previously examined the 'new language of learning' (Biesta 2005, 2006), and has argued that this has led to a discursive shift:

...including the tendency to refer to teachers as facilitators of learning, to teaching as the creation of learning opportunities, to schools as learning environments, to students as learners and adults as adult learners, to the field of adult education as that of lifelong learning, and to the very idea of education as that of 'teachingandlearning'—which I deliberately write as one word, as this is how many people nowadays seem to use it.

(Biesta, 2012, 37).

Biesta (2012) attributes this shift to both postmodern critiques of authority, and also the neoliberal imperative that the individual should take responsibility for their own learning. He also speculates that prevalence of online resources and interactive possibilities has led to a notion that the school is an outdated and superfluous institution. He points out the role of constructivist theories in moving the students and 'learning' to centre-stage. While he

acknowledges the need to question authoritarian models of transmission, he also argues that this collapse into a focus on pure process is inadequate:

...the language of learning falls short as an educational language, precisely because, as mentioned, the point of education is never that students learn but that they learn something, for particular purposes and that they learn it from someone. The language of learning is unable to capture these dimensions partly because learning denotes a process that, in itself, is empty with regard to content and direction.

(Biesta 2012, 38).

He concludes that the 'language of learning' is an ideology which serves to 'make what really goes on invisible and inaccessible' (Biesta, 2012, 38). He goes on to point out the need for teachers to make pragmatic and situated decisions in unique contexts. He draws an important distinction between seeing the teacher as simply another resource under the student's control by 'learning from', contrasted with 'being taught by' which involves something entering the student's field of experience from outside of their control. Biesta proposes teaching as a gift, but one which '...depends on the fragile interplay between teacher and student' (2012, 42). He concludes by arguing for a conception of teaching 'excellence' as a form of Aristotlean practical wisdom, making 'concrete and situated' judgments:

Such practical wisdom is not a skill or competence—and even less a matter of scientific evidence—but a quality or 'excellence'... The 'excellence' that is at stake here is in Greek called *ἀρετή* which, in English translation becomes 'virtue.' While we might say that the question of the formation of the teacher should be orientated towards becoming a 'virtuous' professional, it is perhaps more informative to suggest that the question of the formation of the teacher should

be oriented towards a certain 'virtuosity' with regard to making concrete situated judgments about what is educationally desirable.

(Biesta, 2012,45)

Biesta develops his argument against the notion of teaching as *facilitation of learning* further in a recent paper (Biesta, 2016) where he draws on the work of Levinas (1985) to argue that we do not - contrary to the mainstream assumptions of constructivist theory – become subjects through personal acts of signification, but instead through *being addressed by another*, in this case the teacher. Through this argument, he continues to develop his call for a different form of understanding teaching in a progressive framing, but also in a way which avoids a collapse into a simplistic binary of 'teacher-centred' or 'student-centred'.

Biesta's analysis, while derived from the context of schooling, seems highly pertinent to the current situation in higher education, where a concomitant focus on 'facilitation of learning' has come to dominate discourse, policy and practice – leading to the emphasis on student interactivity and the related devaluing of content and teaching as discussed above. These powerful discourses are guiding the sector in terms of how teaching 'excellence' should be understood, and delineating how it should be defined and then measured. Biesta's reframing of excellence to include a teacher's *practical wisdom* is a welcome rebalancing move, in particular his emphasis on the situated, the unique and the concrete. Biesta is reminding us that education as lived experience is never abstract, but is always situated in the messy, compromised and particular setting of day-to-day practice.

However, arguably Biesta still maintains a fundamentally humanist conception, which places the agency surrounding both teaching and learning exclusively in human hands, and also sees

it as residing in the teacher-student relationship. Arguably - while this relationship is central - in order to capture the messy, complex nature of contemporary student engagement in material and digital spaces we may profit not only from a move away from the dominance of constructivist theories of learning, but towards a sociomaterial framing (e.g. Fenwick *et al.*, 2011). This sees engagement as radically distributed across a range of actors, including nonhuman actors more conventionally viewed as 'tools' or elements of 'context'. As they put it:

Humans, and what they take to be their learning and social process, do not float, distinct, in container-like contexts of education, such a classrooms or community sites that can be conceptualised and dismissed as simply a wash of material stuff and spaces. The things that assemble these contexts, and incidentally the actions and bodies including human ones that are part of these assemblages, are continuously acting upon each other to bring forth and distribute, as well as to obscure and deny, knowledge.

(Fenwick, *et al.*, 2011, vii)

This perspective allows us to reframe engagement in education, extending the notion of agency to take in artefacts conventionally regarded as 'tools' – computers, desks, books, pens, and so on. A sociomaterial framing would see these as integral to social process, and constantly entangled in networks of practice with human actors. This strand of theoretical work has its origins in Actor–Network Theory (e.g. Latour, 2005), a perspective which sees social process as emergent via these networks, composed of human and non-human actors. Viewed through this lens, student engagement could be conceptualised as not simply situated in the volition or orientation of the individual student - or even in the student in dialogue with the teacher - but instead engagement could be regarded as emerging through a constantly shifting network of

actors – the student, the class, the teacher, the institution, the lecture theatre, the laptop, the notepad. The resources and surroundings of the university would not be regarded as a neutral ‘context’ or backcloth in this perspective, but instead would also be recognised as actors which play a role in configuring the flow of day- to-day practice. Here student engagement can be seen to reside in the fine-grained, small-scale and often unobserved acts of situated practice, a close-up view which stands in contrast to ideological or abstract conceptions, allowing for more of an ethnographic lens to be trained on what it means to be a student. This extension could be a generative next step in this process of broadening out our understanding of student engagement, and the distributed agency of students, teachers, material settings and institutions – allowing policy and examination of teaching and the student experience to be rooted in the ‘messy’ networks of everyday practice and ‘practical wisdom’.

Conclusions

As argued above, the emphasis on *interaction as engagement* reinforces a very particular theoretical framing of learning as situated in student interaction, with a powerful focus on process and observable interlocution over content and solitary engagement with ideas. This could be viewed as an over-extension of social constructivism which - instead of rightly recognising the socially-constructed nature of knowledge and knowledge practices – goes beyond this step and places observable verbal interaction as an apparent, and sole precondition to and the primary site of, ‘the social’ and learning. As Biesta has argued, an over-emphasis on *facilitation of learning* has led to a collapse into process alone, where the teaching, content and expertise are disavowed and regarded as retrograde or irrelevant to learning. Biesta (2012) makes a compelling case for the reinstatement of teaching in a progressive model, arguing for the notion of excellence as *practical wisdom*. I have proposed an extension to this move which

also recognises the sociomaterial and radically distributed nature of human and nonhuman agency in day-to-day student practices, potentially allowing for a richer and more nuanced range of ways in which we might conceptualise student engagement.

In terms of relevance to policy, such a reframing could allow for a more nuanced and less ideologically-freighted approach to enhancing and developing the teaching work of higher education. This re-examination could lead to a more balanced conception of the respective roles of student, teacher and institution – avoiding a collapse into an over-simplistic educational model. In practical terms, this could lead to a reconsideration of the ‘language of learning’ which has come to dominate policy and related frameworks, leading to a more practice-based recognition of the day-to-day situated nature of the work of being a teacher and being a student, in complex sociomaterial settings both face-to-face and online. This – somewhat ironically – could lead to a more truly ‘student-centred’ conception of higher education, where policy could be informed by insights into the messy complexities of day-to-day student engagement as sociomaterial practice, rather being driven by seductive, but ultimately limiting and ideologically-driven abstractions.

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