0419

Conceptualising Engagement: How do relational transactions, motivation and external factors influence engagement in a tertiary setting?

Alison Ayrton, Jill Moseley
University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

Background

Student engagement is a complex construct and extensive research has been conducted exploring what students, institutions and educators can do to improve engagement, learning and consequentially outcomes and success. Student engagement research in tertiary education builds on the foundational work of Robert Pace and Alexander Astin. From this a growing body of research literature is evident particularly in the USA (Kuh, G., Kinzie, J., Whitt, R., & Associates, 2005) and increasingly in the UK (Yorke, 2006) and Australia (Krause & Coates, 2008). Pace and Astin's concepts of; the quality of the student's effort and the extent of their involvement in the academic environment are central in most definitions, although the literature suggests engagement is a complex and multi-dimensional construct. Kuh et al. (2005) describes engagement as the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities. Chapman (cited in Leach & Zepke, 2009) goes beyond this by adding; student's cognitive investment in, active participation in and emotional commitment to their learning.

In the literature researchers have emphasised different aspects of engagement; student motivation and effort, transactional engagement (the interactions between teachers and students, and between students) (Kuh et al. 2005), what institutions do to engage learners (Yorke, 2006) and lastly, a democratic-critical perspective, conceiving engagement as participatory, dialogic and leading beyond academic success to include success as an active citizen.

Increasingly, student engagement is being used as the organising construct for institutional assessment, accountability and improvement efforts. It continues to be an important area to further understand and effect change enabling both performative and generative knowledge and learning beyond the curriculum.

Research Questions

This research was conducted at the University of Canterbury, and is positioned within a wider national teaching and learning research initiative being undertaken across nine tertiary institutions in New Zealand. The following research question forms the basis of this research project: ''How do institutional and non-institutional learning environments influence student engagement with learning in diverse tertiary settings?' The specific questions this paper seeks to address are; what is student engagement, and how do teachers, external factors and student motivation influence engagement?

Methods

The case study reported in this paper investigated student perceptions of the importance of; motivation and effort, transactional engagement, and external/non-institutional influences on their engagement during their first year of study. Students in their first year of study at the University of Canterbury provided the data through a questionnaire survey and interviews. The questionnaire invitation was made to students using email, it was accessible online and in paper form to anyone who requested this. A self selection process was used for interview participation.

Frame

A conceptual organiser was developed by the researchers to make sense of the complexity of the engagement literature. Four key strands emerged from the literature review; motivation and agency,

transactional engagement, institutional support, and active citizenship (Zepke & Leach, 2008). This was used as an organising framework to construct the survey, interview questions and also in the analysis of the data.

A mixed-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis was employed. The questionnaire data was analysed statistically exploring frequency and central tendency patterns across the demographic subgroups. The interview data was used to illuminate and substantiate findings.

Data from the project were used to review and adjust the conceptual organiser to include six strands and indicators. The transactional strand separates interaction between students and teachers, and interaction between students in the revised version. Non-institutional support was included as a new strand.

Strand of engagement and **Chosen indicators**

Motivation and Agency

(Engaged students are intrinsically motivated and want to exercise their agency)

A learner feels able to work autonomously

A learner feels they have a relationship with others

A learner feels competent to achieve success

Transactional engagement

(Students engage with teachers)

Students experience academic challenge

Learning is active and collaborative inside and outside the classroom

Students and teachers interact constructively

Students have enriching educational experiences

Transactional engagement

(Students engage with each other)

Learning is active and collaborative inside and outside the classroom

Students have positive constructive peer relationships

Students use social skills to engage with others

Institutional support

(Institutions provide an environment conducive to learning)

There is a strong focus on student success

There are high expectations for all students

There is investment in a variety of support services

Diversity is valued

Institutions continuously improve

Active citizenship

(Students and institutions work together to enable challenges to social beliefs and practices)

Students are able to make legitimate knowledge claims

Students can engage effectively with others including the 'other'

Students have a firm sense of themselves

Learning is participatory, dialogic, active and critical

Non-institutional support

(Students are supported by family and friends to engage in learning)

Students' family and friends understand the demands of study

Students' family and friends assist with e.g. childcare, time management

Students' family and friends create space for study commitments

Research findings

In this paper, attention is focused on summarising patterns of engagement emerging from the questionnaire and interviews. The data suggests that students perceived several important influences on their engagement; the quality of the interactions with their teachers, the pedagogical approaches used, and the teacher's professional ontology, expressed through the passion revealed in their delivery. We explore these in detail and propose a range of strategies and practices which may be useful across diverse contexts to strengthen student engagement in tertiary institutions.

References

Krause, K-L., & Coates, H. (2008) Students' engagement in first-year university. Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 33 (5), 493-505

Kuh, G., Kinzie, J., Whitt, R., & Associates (2005) Student success in college: creating conditions that matter. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Leach, L., & Zepke, N. (2009). Engaging first year students: A conceptual organiser for student engagement. Paper presentation at the First Year in Higher Education Conference, Townsville, 29 June - 1 July.

Yorke, M. (2006, 12-14 July). Student engagement: Deep, surface or strategic? Keynote address presented at the 9th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, Engaging Students. Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus, Australia