Original Article

Critiques of Student Engagement

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Student engagement initiatives at the national, institutional and classroom level have emerged against a backdrop of rising participation rates and the marketisation of higher education. This context has informed the development of a literature that is heavily influenced by cause-effect framing and a focus on effectiveness. However, in recent years an alternative, critical literature has emerged that challenges some of the assumptions of the student engagement movement on the grounds of student rights and freedoms as learners. This review article identifies the following six critiques of student engagement based on an analysis of the literature and arguments stemming from analyses of the effects of neoliberalism, namely *performativity, marketing*, *infantilisation*, *surveillance*, *gamification* and *opposition*. It is concluded that at a policy and institutional governance level, there is a need to shift the emphasis from what and how questions concerning student engagement to consider its broader political, economic and ethical implications as a means of challenging the prevailing policy narrative.
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Introduction

Over the last decade, student engagement has become a significant area of academic research and university policy development. At a policy level, 'student engagement' is attracting increasing attention internationally as a core element of institutional learning and teaching strategies and through national student engagement surveys in most developed higher education systems. The National Survey of Student Engagement, first introduced in the US in 2000, is now used in most other developed higher education systems including Australia, Canada, South Korea, China, Japan, New Zealand, Mexico, Ireland, South Africa and the UK and serves as an illustration of this trend (Coates and McCormick, 2014). In parallel with policy development, a growing literature has sought to define 'student engagement' and develop pedagogic strategies to increase student engagement.

Research is principally focused on measuring the impact of policies and pedagogic initiatives designed to increase the extent to which students engage actively and measurably in learning, university and wider community activities. A literature review on student engagement published in 2015 for the Higher Education Academy drew on 21,000 academic papers (Evans *et al.*, 2015), indicating both the breadth of academic interest and a high degree of conceptual confusion.

The emergence of student engagement as a significant strand of research into higher education contexts may be explained largely by reference to rising participation rates on an international basis at a time of increasing marketization of the university sector (Brown and Carasso, 2013). These twin forces have led governments to be increasingly concerned about completion rates and levels of student achievement as a means of demonstrating value for money from public and private investment. This, in turn, has increased demands on institutions in respect to monitoring and reporting of relevant data. Hence, it perhaps unsurprising that the vast majority of published literature on student engagement is concerned with its effectiveness. This research seeks to link student achievement measured in terms of a range of 'positive' outcomes such as higher attendance and retention rates, examination and degree results, and employment rates with a range of pedagogic interventions often connected with active and experiential learning.

The policy framework for student engagement that many institutions have put in place is often linked to levers that aim to capture the measured outcomes of the performance of students, graduates, teachers and that of the university itself. Institutions in most national contexts are subject to top-down and bottom-up pressures, both of which are largely conjoined. Top-down government pressures are related to the continued drive to enhance HEIs' competitiveness in international markets and for institutions to produce highly employable graduates. Recent proposals in the UK to link university performance (and, by extension, market competition) to teaching effectiveness signals the importance now attached to measurable output (DBIS, 2015). Paradoxically, the markers of excellence and, to a large extent, value, appear to be strongly associated with attainment of key metrics at the meso-level (for example, graduate outcomes in the UK) that may have only a limited relationship to teaching quality, student engagement and learning gain at the micro- or classroom level. The bottom-up pressures emerge from students' shifting expectations of higher education, how it is meant to be delivered and what outcomes it will generate. Institutions themselves, and not just policy-makers, have been culpable in framing these expectations, and the related value markers, often as a response to the market-driven context they operate within. At the same time, all key stakeholders have some potential mediatory role in the direction of student engagement policy: institutional leaders can potentially implement practices and innovations which serve institutional goals, teachers can adapt practices in ways which reflect disciplinary and professional goals and students are able to formally

evaluate services or make more meaningful inputs to the shaping of institutional policy and practice.

However, the assumptions underpinning student engagement policies and pedagogic practices are beginning to be subject to serious critique. An alternative literature is emerging which is questioning the meaning of student engagement, whether strategies are effective in producing learning gain, and critiquing their various impacts on students (e.g. Gourlay, 2015; Macfarlane, 2015; Zepke, 2014a, b, 2015). Similar criticisms have also been levelled in the compulsory school sector as well where assertions of the link between student engagement and achievement have been described as a 'hegemonic discourse' (Zyngier, 2008, p. 1767). This paper discusses the lack of conceptual clarity and methodological weaknesses in the current literature related to higher education and also identifies six critiques of student engagement drawing on a range of socio-critical perspectives. These perspectives provide alternative conceptual lenses through which to evaluate the effects and implications of the policies and associated pedagogic practices of the student engagement movement.

Conceptual Confusion

In common with a number of other meta-concepts widely used in higher education, such as collegiality or employability, 'student engagement' is a nebulous and contentious term subject to multiple interpretations (Trowler, 2010). It implies a series of conceptual commitments, teaching strategies and behavioural orientations expected of university students. In policy terms, it is driven by efforts to improve student completion and success rates at university, whilst pedagogically it is underpinned by a teaching philosophy that is linked with social constructivism. Many definitions of student engagement emphasise the importance of students being actively engaged in a participatory culture and experiencing an interactive approach to teaching (Newswander and Borrego, 2009). Symbolised at the national level by the National Survey of Student Engagement (Coates and McCormick, 2014), it has spawned multiple institutional level initiatives designed to identify and support those students deemed to be 'at risk of disengaging from their learning and their institution' (Nelson *et al.*, 2012, p. 83).

Although there is a lack of a settled or widely agreed definition of student engagement (Trowler, 2010; Evans *et al.*, 2015), most well-cited definitions tend to draw on a framework of three dimensions: behavioural, psychological and socio-cultural (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004). Lester's (2013, p. 3) review of the student engagement literature similarly concludes that the three-fold classification suggested by Fredricks *et al.* 'comprise the 'meta-construct' of engagement'. These elements also form the basis Kahu's conceptual framework for understanding student engagement that identifies three dimensions of the concept: the affect

('interest, enthusiasm and belonging'), cognition ('deep learning, self-regulation') and behaviour ('time and effort, interaction, participation') (Kahu, 2013, p. 766). Whilst several writers make a distinction between cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions, many others use them interchangeably (Ashwin and McVitty, 2015). Drawing on this framework, Trowler's (2010, p. 3) definition of student engagement, based on a literature review commissioned by the Higher Education Academy, offers a definition that emphasises behaviour (i.e. 'time, effort and other relevant resources'), and links with both cognition (i.e. 'learning outcomes and development of students') and institutional efficiency ('performance, and reputation of the institution').

> 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, p. 3)

Evans *et al.* definition (2015, p. 10) stresses all three characteristics: affect ('get students more involved'), cognition ('the quality of student learning') and behaviour (i.e. 'active participation and interaction').

> The concept of student engagement suggests positive involvement in programmes through active participation and interaction at a class level. Often underpinning this assertion is the assumption that any activities that get students more involved are a positive step towards improving the quality of student learning.
> Evans *et al.* (2015, p. 10)

The same study used a more focused sample of publications to identify the pedagogical approaches most closely associated with the promotion of student engagement. This revealed that 25% of articles made reference to active approaches to learning, whilst a further 26% alluded to collaborative, co-operative or group-based activities. Nearly, all authors agree that student engagement is difficult to define and this leads some to adopt a more catholic characterisation. In their synthesis of the research literature on student engagement, Zepke and Leach (2010) argue that an appropriate working definition is offered by the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER):

> students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning
> (ACER, 2008, p. vi)

Hence, whilst the phrase student engagement is used quite broadly within the literature in respect to what it can purportedly achieve, it may be understood as based mainly on behavioural expectations that relate to students adopting a positive attitude towards learning actively and more broadly contributing to the life of the institution leading to higher levels of individual achievement and degree completion. It also strongly implies that teaching strategies need to use active and experiential approaches in order to achieve enhanced student engagement.

Methodological Weaknesses

The bulk of the literature on student engagement is focused on theorising and applying strategies for increasing student engagement based on tenets such as active learning, experiential learning and students as 'co-producers'. Research has typically focused on the behavioural (e.g. Zepke, 2014a), cognitive (e.g. Ashwin and McVitty, 2015) or affective dimensions (e.g. Kahu, 2013). However, student engagement remains under-theorised (Kahn, 2014) and the methodology employed by researchers in the area often lacks rigour. Many studies are based on a simplistic cause and effect research design and few studies contain any longitudinal analysis. Cause–effect studies initially identify various engagement-related problems among students — lack of subject interest, poor academic attainment, negative course evaluation, a high dropout rate — which are then resolved through an engagement initiative. The analysis undertaken by Evans *et al.* (2015, p. 10) concludes that the student engagement literature currently assumes a link between engagement and impact based on 'a directly causal link between pedagogy and learning outcomes which have a largely behavioural dimension'.

Whilst some studies show demonstrably positive learning outcomes and make strong attributions back to the engagement initiative, this is not the case across the board. In attempting to prove the value and efficacy of engagement practices, many of the studies are prone to presenting a particular practice as a panacea to improving student engagement. There is also a tendency to make inferences about the wider development gains resulting from such practices without a sufficient evidence base. There is not always, for example, any firm longitudinal evidence of genuine improvement in students' learning gain or harder cognitive-level data as to how it has improved students' intellectual capacities. The most robust method-ological studies use more advanced multi-methods and clearer control samples spread across a reasonable time-scale (Evans *et al.*, 2015). The less rigorous ones tended to employ rudimentary post-engagement surveys or anecdotal accounts of students' perceptions of enhanced satisfaction. The continued conflation of satisfaction with engagement (when in fact the former has little to do with quality

of learning or actual learning gains) makes the issue of effectively capturing student engagement in research a continued challenge.

The lack of methodological rigour may be linked to the, normally unacknowledged, positionality and insiderism of many of those who research and publish on aspects of student engagement. Positionality relates to the values and beliefs of researchers, whilst insiderism (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007) refers to the extent to which the researcher is a member of the organisation or profession under scrutiny. Educational researchers often fail to be explicit about their values or recognise that an alternative set might have informed the research design (Hammersley, 2007). They are also more likely to publish statistically significant outcomes rather than report statistically non-significant findings that fail to support their hypotheses (Pigott *et al*., 2013). A lack of 'control' for positionality and insiderism, especially when there is a single investigator, can compromise the trustworthiness of the data derived from any study. The funding of research into student engagement at the institutional level linked to learning and teaching and student engagement strategies adds to the pressures on researchers to ensure that findings match the expectations of those providing the funding.

The role played by institutional imperatives to improve retention and completion rates means that the focus of research studies tends to be on institutional targets rather than the individual student. This can result in a deficit model whereby students are pathologised as the undisciplined and apathetic object of engagement research, devoid of the skills which will equip them well in the future. Students uninterested in institutional or pedagogic interventions can be negatively labelled as apathetic or disengaged rather than engaged. Yet, by much the same token, institutions which do not put effective engagement strategies in place might be charged as unresponsive to students' shifting demands and inflexible in their approach to pedagogic innovation and governance. The drive towards disciplining students to attain effective learning outcomes might be seen in contrast to more libertarian approaches to learners' development associated with authors such as Carl Rogers (Macfarlane, 2016b). In Rogers' theorising, students should be able to learn at their own pace under the conditions of their choosing, including sufficient space for contemplation and negotiating educational challenges on their own terms. In this sense, 'student-centred' becomes a far more personalised and diverse process which enables learners to have the freedom to elect to be unengaged with mandatory practice if they choose, in contrast to the emphasis placed on compliance within many engagement policies and associated practice, such as compulsory attendance requirements.

It is claimed that student engagement has become both an 'orthodoxy' (Zepke, 2014a, p. 697) and 'mainstream' (Zepke, 2015, p. 1311) demonstrating an 'elective affinity' with neoliberalism (Zepke, 2014b). Criticism has also centred on the need for compliance with modes of active learning (e.g. Gourlay, 2015) resulting, it is argued, in a diminution of student academic freedom in the process (Macfarlane,

2016b). Many of these critiques of student engagement are closely connected to analyses based on the impact of neoliberalism on university life and student learning that has embedded a market analogy within assumptions about the function and purposes of higher education. Neoliberalism reifies competition as the central feature of human relations and within higher education it has had a number of effects including marketisation and the re-definition of students as customers. Many student engagement policies are premised on the need to meet organisational and broader market efficiency targets in terms of student completion now that higher education is primarily about the preparation of students for employment (see Giroux, 2014). This is why the need for students to develop appropriate professional or work-related attitudes, such as good timekeeping or punctuality, is often cited in university regulations justifying compulsory attendance rules (Macfarlane, 2013). One of the leading proponents of the student engagement movement, George Kuh, (and colleagues in Kuh *et al.*, 2006), defines 'student success' at university in terms of individual economic well-being and lifetime earnings together with the 'production' of graduates by universities in the way this meets, or fails to meet, the needs of the economy. Hence, the favoured strategies of student engagement are heavily influenced by an acceptance of the legitimacy of neoliberalism, whilst oppositional voices critique this set of assumptions.

Stemming from a relatively common set of concerns based on the effects of neoliberalism on student learning, this paper will explore the following six critiques of student engagement: *performativity, marketing*, *infantilisation*, *surveillance*, *gamification* and *opposition*. These analyses relate both to the motivation and role of the institution (e.g. *engagement-as-marketing*, *engagement-as-surveillance)* and to the manner in which student engagement impact on student behaviour and freedom as adult learners (e.g. *engagement-as-infantilisation*, *engagement-as-gamification*). Conceptually, a number of leading social science theorists tend to be invoked in informing many of these critiques of student engagement policies and practice. These include Foucault's work on confession in modern society and the Panopticon, (Foucault, 1977), Lasch's work on narcissism (Lasch, 1979), Rose's concept of governmentality (Rose, 1990) and Carl Rogers' libertarian philosophy of student-centred learning (Rogers, 1969). Application of social science perspectives shed new, critical light on student engagement policy and practices raising questions that relate to student freedom and rights as well as learning gain (Macfarlane, 2016b). An explanation and elaboration of these critiques will form the basis of the next part of this paper.

Engagement-as-Performativity

Performativity is a word conventionally associated with the effects of the audit culture on professional life. Targets and 'performance indicators' are now a staple

part the evaluation of public sector professionals such as social workers, health professionals, teachers and university academics tracking behavioural standards as well as financial objectives. Performative regimes are acknowledged to have the effect of changing the behaviour of those subject to them in order to meet targets and performance indicators. The effect of the research assessment exercise, first introduced in the UK in 1986, for example, has been to shift the priorities of university academics away from teaching and towards research (Lucas, 2006).

Student engagement regimes require students to comply with a series of targets and performance indicators in an audit of their performance as learners. These place a growing emphasis on the process of learning as opposed to evidence of more conventional forms of academic attainment. Examples now commonplace include compulsory attendance, class contribution grading, and an online equivalent via postings to discussion forums. Here, there is a considerable emphasis on students being perceived as 'active' learners, a requirement that Gourlay (2015, p. 402) has labelled the 'tyranny of participation'. These performative demands align, however, with the behavioural dimension of conventional definitions of student engagement. Kahu (2013, p. 766) and McCormick and Kinzie (2014, p. 14) both argue that students should be rewarded for the 'time and effort' they put into their studies. This requirement is echoed in the UK government's teaching excellence framework which defines student engagement partly in terms of 'student effort' (DBIS, 2015, p. 32).

The measurement of student learning focuses mainly on what is visible and easily observable (e.g. class attendance; asking a question in class) as opposed to forms of engagement that may be more difficult to observe and record (e.g. note taking, listening or thinking). The use of 'real world' examples and experiential learning are regarded as central to effective practice in promoting student engagement the latter of which is often linked to critical self-reflection exercises (Evans *et al.*, 2015). Critics argue that assessment of performative forms of student learning constitutes an academic 'non-achievement', such as attendance at class, controlled by a series of behavioural and transactional incentives (e.g. Sadler, 2010, p. 727).

From this perspective, student engagement can be interpreted as a largely externally imposed agenda, from the perspective of government efficiency in the allocation of resources and institutional effectiveness. Consequently, it does little to enhance learners' autonomy or scope in setting the conditions of their own learning. In a Foucauldian sense, student engagement might be construed as a means of disciplining students towards effective modes of conformance and desired personal conducts which are intended to serve themselves and their institutions well. In highly performative institutional cultures, student engagement is an overt manifestation of the regulated student subject who exercises desired forms of behavioural compliance. The concept of governmentality developed by Rose (1990) is apposite here as it captures the ways in which wider neoliberal power

structures feed into the subjectivities of its key agents. For contemporary students, the need to perform, compete, achieve desired outcomes and enhance their future labour market profile all become the key modes of self-discipline as they exercise greater responsibility for their personal fortunes.

Engagement-as-Marketing

In an increasingly market-driven environment, institutions have to proactively showcase what they do and why attending a particular institution will be of benefit to a prospective student. It could further be argued that student engagement is not divorced from the market-driven higher education environment of countries such as the US, UK and Australia, and instead has become a potent market signal. Whilst much of the key information which universities provide is not always used as a guide for directing student behaviour, it still provides a potential narrative on how effective institutional provision is and how this may benefit the student/graduate who attends. In the UK, one of the major student surveys, the National Student Satisfaction Survey, is used as a measure of students' perceptions of the quality of their experience. This has been more recently adapted to include measures of how engaging their formal experiences are perceived to be, including the responsiveness of teachers. In other countries, there are other direct student engagement measures such as the NEES in the US and AEES in Australia.

In a market-driven environment, the more information that can be used to promote an institution the more an institution potentially stands to gain in presenting a favourable image of what it offers a prospective student body. Such information is strategically vital and high stakes given that reporting of data can impact positively or negatively on an institution's market power. In the UK, the recent White Paper on higher education (DBIS, 2016) has proposed making a stronger link between teaching quality (now framed as teaching excellence) and an institution's capacity to charge higher tuition fees. There are clearly strong institutional risks in failing to adequately engage students, especially as this is manifest in the form of readily consumable public information about an institution's teaching quality. As Trowler (2010, p. 27) has pointed out, as student engagement is now seen as a strong indicator of quality, it makes perfect sense for a university to use data indicative of success as 'a marketing device'.

Critics therefore claim that student engagement is based on compliance with managerial, economically driven goals that are aligned to the growing marketization and neoliberalism of higher education (Zepke, 2015; Collini, 2012, Lynch, 2006). Criticism has been directed at universities that deploy data gathered from student engagement surveys and high profile exemplars involving student community engagement as a mechanism by which to promote and differentiate their institutions in the market. There are linked themes to the rise in student

consumerism and the notion that, as major stakeholders and personal investors in HE, students have now acquired significant leverage in demanding experience perceived to be congruent to their role as key market agents.

Whilst the rise in student consumerism has been challenged in many quarters, educationally, philosophically and morally, as well as the extent to which it adequately captures current student relations to institutions, governments are actively seeking to affirm students' consumer sovereignty and related sets of consumer rights (DBIS, 2015). Related to the reported rise in student consumerism is the role of students as 'regulators' of their institutions: students are encouraged to make stronger inputs in steering and monitoring institutional provision often under the remit of 'student voice' or sometimes more couched in terms of 'student partnerships'. In UK institutions, it is now common for student services to adopt a customer service approach in responding to students' demands (for instance, 'you said, we did'). If the latter does not directly indicate a student consumer ethic, it is nonetheless symbolically loaded with a discourse of student rights. The notion of the student as regulator is a strong underlying theme in this approach. The intended move in the UK towards a student regulatory watchdog, the Office for Students, will potentially provide an even more robust framework for enabling students to formally feed into processes that seek to maximise their stake in higher education (particularly now that they are making significant personal financial contributions).

Whether marketing is based on appealing to a consumer market or not it is now a significant feature and imperative of higher education (Maringe and Gibbs, 2009). The key market information disseminated by institutions connects to both process and outcomes. In the former case, institutions seek to present a narrative of what prospective students' experiences will be like, including the quality of their learning and level of resources they can expect. Formal student engagement measures are increasingly part of this information landscape in so far as they depict one particular notion of students' satisfaction with the quality of their learning experience. In the latter case, market information can signal the post-experience benefits and outcomes, the most immediate and measurable being the future rate of return on studying at a specific institution.

Engagement-as-Infantilisation

The word 'infantilisation' refers to the treatment of adults as if they were children and is associated with arguments advanced by popular sociologists that society at large is increasingly in the grip of a therapy culture (e.g. Furedi, 2004). It has even begun to enter the political vocabulary. The former British Education Secretary Michael Gove used this term to describe teaching practices within the secondary school history curriculum involving the comparison of historical figures with

contemporary individuals in popular culture, a development that might be pejoratively labelled 'dumbing down' by critics.

A number of elements of learning at university closely connected with student engagement policies and practices have been identified as infantilising. Compulsory attendance rules, seen as positively encouraging higher levels of engagement and achievement by many student engagement policies and advocates (e.g. Coates and McCormick, 2014), have been criticised as a form of infantilisation (Macfarlane, 2013). These also include requiring emotional responses, such as personal reflections on professional or experiential learning, and the role of student support services in placing an emphasis on identifying students who are 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009). The emotional well-being of the learner is now seen as a legitimate concern of institutions and policy-makers (Gilmore and Anderson, 2016).

The argument that underlies the infantilisation critic is that 'higher' education is a distinct, voluntary phase involving the teaching of adults (rather than children). The age of majority differs across the world, although university students in most international contexts are legally defined as adults. In the UK, the age of majority was lowered at the end of the 1960s from 21 to 18 and subsequently in many US states. Whilst 18 years of age is the norm internationally exceptions include 19 in some Canadian and US states, 20 in Japan and Taiwan and 21 in many parts of Africa, the Middle East and Singapore. The maturity of most learners as adults though is one of its distinctive features as a post-compulsory experience underpinning different claims to its 'specialness' as enabling students to become critical thinkers (Barnett, 1988). It then follows that attendance, for example, needs to be understood as a learning choice made by adults and distinct from attendance requirements that might be attached more normally to compulsory school education (Macfarlane, 2016, p. 13).

Engagement-as-Surveillance

Attendance requirements are, in many respects, a form of surveillance and several authors have drawn on Foucault's Panopticon (Foucault, 1977) in critiquing the way in which institutional practices associated with the monitoring of engagement are connected with the use (or abuse) of information and communications technology to monitor student learning. The term learning analytics is now widely used to refer to the gathering and analysis of data on the learning behaviour of students drawing on course management and student information systems (Oblinger, 2012, p. 11). This so-called 'spyware' enables institutions to track, analyse and store evidence of student 'engagement'. Examples include monitoring the quantity and nature of contributions to online discussion forums. The use of technology as a means of monitoring and measuring student engagement is also

said to have a number of effects or impacts on student behaviour. Studies have indicated the effects of student awareness of surveillance in terms of their online browsing behaviour, the topics perceived as appropriate to discuss and writing style (Dawson, 2006). Other authors identify broader ethical issues connected with surveillance and the use of learning analytics such as privacy, informed consent and the ownership and management of data (Slade and Prinsloo, 2013). There is a close connection here between infantilisation, surveillance and performativity since all three are said to result in altered patterns of behaviour intended to bring about conformity or obedience.

Engagement-as-Gamification

Student engagement is closely associated with active learning and experiential learning and associated forms of assessment that require students to demonstrate how they are participating in both an action-oriented and emotional sense. Gamification can be understood here in two senses. The first is the association between learning and game playing which is undertaken in similar ways that someone might engage in other forms of game-like or play-like activity. Proponents of this approach may argue that the more appealing the learning is, the more students are likely to engage and want to participate in learning. They might also argue that such an approach is steeped in more experiential, activity-based learning that enables students to make stronger connections between theory and practice. In ensuring that learning becomes a fun activity, the greater is the likelihood that students will find their learning meaningful and wish to attend sessions. Viewed in this light, an engagement-orientated university teacher is someone who is able to develop practices that potentially mirror game-show pursuits — quizzes, buzz groups, online voting, face/place recognition — and this may be framed as educationally beneficial if students better assimilate facts and make stronger connections between materials. One of the obvious issues here is that, far from such activities being experientially rich and equipping students well for the challenges of the labour market, they may well produce forms of instant gratification that have minimal impact beyond the immediate value it brings.

Another meaning to gamification is the approach students may develop towards study that is strategically geared towards meeting goals in the most efficient ways possible. If conditions are set for students to succeed when the bar for in-depth learning has been lowered, they may well feel compelled to use a strategic approach to fulfil set learning goals with minimal effort. One example is the student who writes a reflective journal, the content of which is based on mastering the form of earnest contemplation and (ironic!) mimicking of reflective rumination, rather than a meaningful engagement. Hobbs (2007, p. 414), a former university student now working as a member of academic faculty, writes about the way she undertook

a 'strategic deception' when asked to write a reflective piece about examining disharmony in family relations concocting a story that gave the appearance of authenticity to satisfy assessment demands whilst protecting her personal familial privacy. A range of educational researchers have argued that self-reflection can inhibit students from being truthful (e.g. Sumsion and Fleet, 1996; Boud, 2001). According to Macfarlane (2016b), this form of gamification is a consequence of demands on students which he labels 'emotional performativity'. More broadly such demands are connected to what Foucault refers to as the 'confessing society' (Fejes and Dahlstedt, 2013).

Engagement-as-Opposition

The parameters or boundaries of student engagement are defined and closely controlled and monitored by institutions. Even student unions in the UK appear to promote the benefits of being a 'student rep', for example, within the limited parameters of student engagement policies by focusing on how such roles develop students' work-related skills (Edmond and Berry, 2014). Where students actively refuse to conform or learn within such boundaries, rather than merely showing disinterest or 'disengagement', they are entering into what has been referred to as 'oppositional' or 'negative' engagement (Trowler, 2015, p. 304). This involves defying the conventional boundaries and expectations of institutional student engagement initiatives. Instead of attending lectures, they can decide to disrupt them through a boycott or a strike, reject expectations that they need to demonstrate interest or enthusiasm for learning, or redefine the parameters of assignments they are set.

Where student activism falls outside rather than within the expected norms of institutions, this could be classified as 'engagement-as-opposition'. Trowler (2010) identifies engagement as a behavioural norm seen as the polar opposite to students who are perceived as apathetic or inactive. This phrase may also be interpreted more politically as referring to students who act in ways that are seen as engaging *outside* of institutional framing of student engagement in ways that challenge the university's policy or decisions reached by governing bodies. Expected norms might include acting as a student representative within university committee and governance structures, whilst forms of oppositional engagement could include protesting about the 'corporatisation' of the campus, such as 2013 student protests at Birmingham and Sussex universities about the outsourcing of campus services (Macfarlane, 2016b). Students here are demonstrating an alienation from the behavioural norms expected of them.

Hence, as Mann (2001) has argued, engagement may be contrasted with alienation. This may occur in respect to the learning environment where students refuse to comply with behavioural expectations such as attending class punctually,

accepting grades and feedback without protest or demonstrating 'enthusiasm' for learning in class by participating orally in class. Here, students who remain quiet rather than speaking up in class can be negatively labelled as 'social loafers' (Latane *et al.*, 1979), or as 'online lurkers' (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000). Those that ask for their grades to be reviewed are seen as 'grade grubbers', whilst 'feral learners' are simply individuals who choose to engage with knowledge in ways that may not conform with the preferred expectations of the institution. Those that do not comply with the game playing expectations of student engagement are seen as deviants. Students who lack the right social capital in the way they approach critical thinking, for example, can be thought of as 'too critical or too opinionated' (Danvers, 2015, p. 9).

Conclusion

Whilst student engagement is increasingly recognised nationally and internationally as a key to learning gain and student achievement in higher education (Pascarella *et al.*, 2010), close examination of the evidence suggests mixed results. Questions remain over what constitutes research informed high impact pedagogies (Kuh, 2008) within specific disciplines and in relation to specific dimensions of student engagement. The role that students play as co-constructors of university quality enhancement also needs exploration, and how such roles are potentially conditioned by the institutional context. The potentially negative behavioural effects of policies which promote student engagement, particularly compulsory attendance and class participation, also need to be subject to more critical attention in the context of contemporary assumptions about the role of the modern university based on neoliberal principles.

At a policy and institutional governance level, there is considerable scope for critically engaging with student engagement programmes beyond the fairly normative and prescriptive approaches that dominate current thinking and practice. Critical policy analysis enables the focus to shift from the *what* and *how* questions so prevalent in current research and popular discussion on student engagement to questions concerning its wider political and economic context and antecedents and the different ways in which it can be conceived as a policy narrative. Such an approach invites related questions around why student engagement is now so dominant (and largely unchallenged), the different levels through which it operates and the ways it differentially impacts on the different policy actors who are the centre of this development. This is a challenging endeavour but one which will provide an alternative framework, indeed paradigm, for future analysis and discussion of this multi-faceted and contentious issue.

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