

Understanding and Developing Student Engagement



**Edited by
Colin Bryson**



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Enhancing the student experience, and in particular student engagement, has become a primary focus of Higher Education. It is in particularly sharp focus as Higher Education moves forward into the uncertain world of high student fees and a developed Higher Education market. Student engagement is a hot topic, in considering how to offer 'value' and a better student experience. Moreover, it is receiving much attention all over the world and underpins so many other priorities such as retention, widening participation and improving student learning generally.

Understanding and Developing Student Engagement draws from a range of contributors in a wide variety of roles in Higher Education and all contributors are actively involved in the Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement (RAISE) Network.

While utilizing detailed case examples from UK universities, the authors also provide a critical review and distillation of the differing paradigms of student engagement in America, Australasia, South Africa and Europe, drawing upon key research studies and concepts from a variety of contexts.

This book uncovers the multi-dimensional nature of student engagement, utilizing case examples from both student and staff perspectives, and provides conceptual clarity and strong evidence about this rather elusive notion. It provides a firm foundation from which to discuss practices and policies that might best serve to foster engagement.

Colin Bryson is Director of the Combined Honours Centre at Newcastle University, UK.

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Foreword

Mantz Yorke

‘Student engagement’ has always been an issue in higher education, but only latterly has it gained prominence in the discourse on teaching and learning. The National Survey of Student Engagement (now well into its second decade in the US) has arguably been the most potent influence in this respect, and has spawned derivative versions elsewhere. The key to its success has been the focus on what students actually do in their studies rather than on what has been done to them by the institution in which they are enrolled (roughly the standpoint of surveys of student opinion that are embedded in some higher education systems).

Surveys have their uses, but more is often made of their output than is warranted: one has only to look at the naive use made of the findings from the National Student Survey in the UK to appreciate the point. To search for a ‘measure’ of *the* student experience or *the* level of student engagement on a programme is to chase a chimera, for there are as many student experiences and levels of engagement as there are students (and, as Bryson reminds us in the opening chapter, engagement itself is a complex construct bearing a number of interpretations). Using a ‘measure’ of student engagement would be like focusing on the statistical mean whilst ignoring the ‘messages’ suggested by the standard deviation. If we are to understand student engagement, we have to engage more closely with students’ lived experiences in higher education than any survey will permit. The qualitative data presented in *Understanding and Developing Student Engagement* enables us to do this.

This book juxtaposes the experiences of staff and student voices in an interesting way, and shines different and intriguing light on a familiar academic scene. The students’ voices confirm, at first hand, some aspects of experience in higher education with which many academics are familiar, such as potential students’ limited knowledge of what higher education will really be like; the importance of friendship groups; difficulties with group work (such as free-riding); anxiety about assessment; and unhappiness with being awarded lower grades in higher education than those they had gained at school or in further education.

Diversity is a thread running through the varied chapters of this book, and the evidence presented here implicitly invites readers to reflect on how well they might do on a tough test of pedagogic imagination – how to cater for a cohort

that is heterogeneous in characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity and nationality, and whose domestic arrangements may not always facilitate academic and social integration. Indeed, the book is full of material that provokes thought about how educational programmes should be conducted in a massified higher education system in which, because of the recent rise in tuition fees, the perspective of the ‘student as consumer’ has come to the fore: those involved in post-graduate certificates in learning and teaching in higher education are likely to be engaging in the issues explicitly and implicitly addressed in this book.

From the students’ comments the importance is clear of the personal characteristics that they bring to their studies, such as how determined they are to succeed. But even committed students are vulnerable to negativity in their experience: those with relatively slender reserves of academic and social capital are particularly at risk. The issue for teachers is whether they can pick up, early enough to make a difference, those students whose experience is militating against their success. The co-curricular use of mentors can make a valuable contribution here – and contribute to the mentors’ *curricula vitae*.

Work placement is a ‘step-change’ for some students, when they suddenly find a level of engagement far higher than they had previously managed to achieve. For some, this is likely to mark a shift from performance goals (where the focus is, instrumentally and crudely, on ‘getting the grade’) towards learning goals of various kinds – or, relatedly, a shift away from dependence towards autonomy. Perhaps this is why, on returning to university for the final year’s academic study, some students find themselves almost in stasis as they anticipate work after graduation. Herein, maybe, is another challenge for those responsible for designing and implementing curricula.

This brings us back to the crucial role of the teacher and to teacher engagement. In the UK the former Teacher Training Agency used as an advertising slogan ‘*No one forgets a good teacher*’, forgetting that the same applies to a bad teacher (I remember both, in roughly equal measure). It is a truism that good teachers commit themselves to ensuring that students succeed to the best of their ability. It is equally a truism that students’ success depends on their willingness to engage with the demands of their programmes of study. Whereas teachers cannot guarantee the success of their students, they can – indeed, should – bend the odds in favour of success through their moral commitment to student learning, the attitudes they convey and the methods that they use. Our students deserve (and expect to pay for) no less.

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This book would not have been possible without the many students who consented to share their experiences with us through all the studies undertaken by the contributors to this book, to whom the authors are deeply grateful. As editor I am also deeply grateful to the students who gave time and commitment to writing their own personal stories and reflections as chapters, and also to Eugenie Johnson, who did such fine work as my editorial assistant in the preparation of this book.

Introduction

Colin Bryson

In 2009, I was attending yet another conference, which had student engagement as a major theme, yet did not contain many presentations that were rooted in a conceptual basis on the topic or had much evidence or evaluation applied specifically to engagement. Therefore, it seemed a very good idea to try to build a network with a specific focus on engagement, and thus Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement (RAISE) was born (with thanks to my daughter for the name). A very early collective project was to pull together a book and here it is.

Enhancing the student experience, and in particular student engagement, has become a primary focus of Higher Education. It is particularly in sharp focus in the UK as we move forward into the uncertain world of high student fees and a Higher Education market. Student engagement is a hot topic, in considering how to offer 'value' and a better student experience. Moreover, it is receiving much attention all over the world and underpins so many other priorities such as retention, widening participation and improving student learning generally.

Staff views on student engagement are often based on anecdote or belief rather than good evidence.

Therefore this book is for both staff and students. We offer a critical evaluation of the nature of student engagement, and range of practices that provide opportunities to foster student engagement. RAISE espouses the doctrine of partnership and we have to put that into practice by involving students in the creation of this book.

The book begins with a critical exploration of the most illuminating theories and research drawn from the international literature with a view to mapping the concept. This is followed by three sections:

- 1 Outcomes of recent studies about 'students engaging' – interpretations by researchers based on rich evidence from students.
- 2 Students writing directly about their engagement – and what engages them.
- 3 Policies and practices across a range of levels, which are effective in 'engaging students'.

Part I comprises three chapters from researchers who undertook separate longitudinal studies following students across the full period of their undergraduate or foundation degrees in three different universities from across England. The students were in a range of contrasting environments and the qualitative studies have uncovered rich and detailed accounts of their experiences; all are unique but some similar themes emerge.

Part II is an unusual and rather special contribution because the eight chapters were very much written by 15 students; five chapters entirely by students. These are powerful narratives of the students reflecting on their experiences, in particular the impact that undertaking roles and projects have had on their engagement and development. There are several themes around student engagement; the value of peer mentoring, student representation and other peer roles; students as researcher inside and outside the curriculum; what students value on learning and teaching; and the perspective of international students.

Part III has five chapters written by staff practitioners who have sought to enhance student engagement. In every case they have gathered and reflected on direct experience of applying these innovative practices and thinking, and this evidence very much reflects the voice of the students involved.

Finally I present some reflections about common and powerful themes emerging from this book and conclude by discussing the concept of student and staff partnership, which I suggest is the likely future of student engagement, as partnership embodies all the principles of student engagement and genuinely places it where it should be: at the centre of Higher Education.

Clarifying the concept of student engagement

Colin Bryson

Introduction

This opening chapter seeks to explore the nature of student engagement (SE) in Higher Education (HE), to map SE conceptually and to articulate the key principles that underpin it. I shall draw on both research evidence and literature and on discussions over the last eight years with colleagues from across the world. My starting position for uncovering the nature of student engagement is premised on the goal of HE being about enabling the individual to learn and develop in powerful and transformative ways. I am positioning the student as active learner, not as consumer of a product such as acquiring a qualification. We may note that even within that definition there are many contestable issues and that students are diverse in every way imaginable. Equally disparate are the lenses commentators have applied to student engagement, as these perspectives reflect diverse traditions of research methodology, philosophy, discipline, and not least location within different educational settings, national and local.

Deciding how to structure all these conceptions and themes around diverse interpretations of the nature of student engagement is challenging. There is no obvious coherent path through this complexity. My criteria for including ideas in this chapter are that they offer an interesting and insightful perspective on SE, not simply because they fit neatly into a coherent framework. There are a few overarching models to present, but also a plethora of research on a single aspect or on issues which relate to SE.

I shall begin with the body of work which is most dominant, at least in volume. There has been over 50 years of research in the United States (US) on this topic, producing a mountain of evidence and publications. This conception of, and approach to, SE has influenced strongly the development of the concept in Australia. Research in other countries on SE tends to be much more recent but emerges from rather different origins and character. Note that some US and Australian research does not follow the dominant paradigm.

A likely explanation for the longstanding interest in the US in SE is that mass participation in HE has had a much longer tradition there and created issues of persistence and attainment among a diverse body of students which drew the

attention of staff, policy makers and researchers. The focus in the United Kingdom (UK) and Europe has followed a different path, with much more emphasis on seeking to understand how students learn rather than on transitions and student success (Solomonides, Reid and Petocz, 2012). Therefore, research specifically on SE in the UK has been much more recent. SE has been construed in quite different ways in the UK from the US paradigm, as has other valuable research within national settings, for example, New Zealand, South Africa, France, Holland and Finland. Another issue which creates confusion within the UK stems from the point that engagement is used to refer to another area which seems quite distinctively different. Specifically, this is SE defined as collective student representation in university governance and decision making.

Seeking to review the relevant research evidence and analysis about SE requires another key consideration. Much excellent and insightful work does not emerge from a trawl of the search term ‘student engagement’, as issues and themes which are highly pertinent are not always described as SE or linked to SE. Thus, so called ‘comprehensive reviews’ of SE, such as Trowler (2010) undertook, can (and did) neglect this wider research base.

Another problem with seeking to be comprehensive is that so many studies on learning and teaching and on the student experience use the term ‘engagement’ very broadly and loosely. Such studies are really about practices or curricular approaches which the authors claim ‘engages students’ but without any conceptualization or evaluation of SE to substantiate such a claim. This ‘background noise’ can influence a reviewer of SE to adopt too narrow a research base in another way too. Thus, Trowler’s rejection of virtually all the UK research studies (and many from elsewhere) on SE on the basis they were based on qualitative evidence, or case studies based on single institutions, or had not been disseminated through particular journals, was deeply flawed. This approach ignored the very useful conceptions of SE that emerged from such studies. My aim here is to take a rather broader critical review to consider all relevant material that may inform the scholarship of SE.

The dominant paradigm – North America and the National Survey of Student Engagement

The roots of SE research in North America lie in the many studies on the ‘whole college experience’ of students. Becker et al. (1961) pioneered this work, and Feldman and Newcomb (1969) produced the first studies on ‘college impact’ on students. This was followed by Pace (1982), who argued that it was the quality and quantity of effort expended by an individual student that led to good academic outcomes. This included investment by the students in both curricular and co-curricular activity. Astin (1984) refined this through a theory of student involvement where he proposed that more involvement resulted in better learning and development; thus institutions and staff should focus on the inducing of motivation and ‘virtuous’ behaviours in the student. The metastudies of Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) supported this notion of the extent to which

students engage being the determinant of their success at college and emphasize that this is *holistic*. Therefore, it is engagement across the piece by the individual that matters because it is mutually reinforcing. This is a powerful message to staff and management about ensuring that what they do to shape the whole experience of students in classroom and beyond is aligned to this objective. The breadth of this was distilled by Chickering and Gamson (1987) into seven principles to be adopted by staff to:

- ensure student-staff contact;
- promote active learning;
- develop cooperation and mutuality between students;
- emphasize time on task;
- give prompt feedback;
- communicate high expectations;
- respect diversity in talent and ways of learning.

Indeed, it was Astin (1991) who went on to develop the first holistic model of SE: Input-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O). The input part is what the students brings: how they have been shaped by their pre-college experience. He identified 146 possible variables that might influence this. He then noted another 192 environmental variables (social, cultural, practical, educational, behavioural inter alia) that might influence how the college experience would impact on students. The outcomes component related to the changes on the student from these impacts: development, success, satisfaction and persistence. This final component had slightly less variables, with a mere 82!

Based on some of these ideas and principles, in 1998 Kuh developed a survey instrument to measure engagement which has had the most profound impact: the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). This has been adopted in over 1500 colleges in the USA and Canada, with several million students now having completed it. It is intended to offer something rather useful to institutional management – a proxy for quality (Kuh et al., 2008b).

Well over 200 papers have now been published on analysis of sets and sub-sets of results from the annual iterations of the application of the survey in all these settings. Therefore, Kuh's definition of engagement has gained a dominant position not just in North America but also in Australia and New Zealand (with the AUSSE) and more recently South Africa (the SASSE), as well as to China (NSSE-China). Kuh (2001: 12) emphasized it is what the students *do* that matters:

Student engagement is defined as students' involvement in activities and conditions that are linked with high-quality learning. A key assumption is that learning outcomes are influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. While students are seen to be responsible for constructing their own knowledge, learning is also seen to depend on institutions and staff generating conditions that stimulate student involvement.

Therefore, the survey was designed to seek manifestations (and to some extent, outcomes) of students doing ‘educationally purposeful activities’ (these are widely defined to capture the ‘whole college experience’). The survey sought to address five benchmarks, all considered to be key components which encourage student engagement. These were:

- Level of academic challenge: extent to which expectations and assessments challenged students to learn.
- Enriching educational experiences: participating in broadening educational activities.
- Active and collaborative learning: students’ efforts to actively construct their knowledge.
- Supportive campus environment: feeling of being legitimized within the community.
- Student–faculty interaction: level and nature of students’ contact with teaching staff.

This is operationalized through a set of questions of items under each benchmark asking students to self-report against of scale of participation in ‘appropriate’ activities, or to identify if opportunities are present to do so. There are some ‘rating’ questions about the quality of environment and services.

After 10 years of application, the survey underwent a major review and update. NSSE 2.0 was introduced in 2013 and changes made reflected the growing use of information technology, clarifying and simplifying questions and refining the benchmarks (McCormick et al., 2013). The revision emphasized factors which had emerged as important for good educational outcomes from earlier results, e.g. reflective and integrative learning, collaborative learning and such activities as study abroad and internships.

The application and analysis of the NSSE has been very powerful in demonstrating that higher levels of student engagement are associated with all sorts of virtuous educational, and other, outcomes. In addition, it has provided strong evidence to address organizational defects and to develop better educational strategies and policies. Kuh (2008) was able to identify 10 types of activity such as engaging in collaborative projects, undergraduate-led research or peer-assisted learning, which he argued were strongly associated with high engagement, i.e. students who achieved high ‘scores’ in the other sections of the survey tended also to have access and participate in such activities. Though this apparent correlation does pose a conundrum, the ‘chicken and egg’ question of: was participation in such activities a catalyst or consequence of manifesting ‘higher’ engagement?

SE in Australia: convergence with the US

The origins of the focus on SE in Australia lie in large-scale surveys carried out on the First Year Experience (FYE) undertaken every five years across the national

HE sector since 1994. Williams (1982) had preceded this with an index of ‘Institutional Belongingness, Social Involvement and Alienation’, which are three themes or concepts which have subsequently emerged as strongly linked to SE, but this did not gain much currency. From the FYE data gathered by the 1994 survey, McInnis and James (1995) developed the concept of ‘connectedness’ as being important for retention and persistence. McInnis (2001) subsequently refined this into ‘negotiated’ student engagement, giving salience to the interactive and dynamic nature of SE. McInnis (2005) argued that strong SE manifests itself when students:

- share the values and approaches to learning of their lecturers (academic orientation);
- spend sufficient time and energy on educationally meaningful tasks;
- learn with others inside and outside the classroom;
- actively explore ideas confidently with other people;
- learn to value perspectives other than their own.

McInnis (2001) has particularly emphasized the salience of the transition into HE in establishing good levels of engagement. He noted that there are more challenges to engagement emerging from a widening heterogeneity of HE experience, from student diversity and mobility, the changing nature of student courses, more and wider student choice, such as e-learning and distance learning options, as well the decreased centrality of campus life to students who work or have families, which makes integration more difficult. Horstmannshof and Zimitat (2003) discussed how such major changes have affected the construction of student identities, where the ‘student self’ has to compete with other selves, but note that does not necessitate lower engagement.

Kerri-Lee Krause took over responsibility for the FYE in 2004 when the survey was redesigned to include more items to assess specific ‘dimensions’ of SE. She defined SE as ‘The time, energy and resources students devote to the activities designed to enhance learning at university’ (Krause et al., 2005: 31). Nearly contemporaneously, Coates provided this definition of SE (2006: 26):

The concept of student engagement is based on the constructivist assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. Learning is seen as a ‘joint proposition,’ however, which also depends on institutions and staff providing students with the conditions, opportunities and expectations to become involved. However, individual learners are ultimately the agents in discussions of engagement.

Coates became the leading Australian proponent of the NSSE-inspired approach to SE and developed the AUSSE. The AUSSE questionnaire was almost identical to the NSSE and was used for the first time in 2007, with first year and later year students in 25 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Australia and New

Zealand. However, in addition to the NSSE scales, a sixth dimension, work-integrated learning, was developed specifically for the AUSSE. This measured the opportunity for students to integrate employment-focused work experiences into study.

Krause and Coates (2008) brought the FYE data and NSSE conceptions together in a joint paper. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the focus they adopted was to present ‘a complementary tool [with the NSSE] in the on-going quest to understand, monitor and promote student engagement’ (ibid.: 503). Thus they produced seven scales of SE. Given the focus on the first year, they added ‘transition engagement’ to academic engagement (developing the capacity to manage one’s time, study habits and strategies); peer (developing knowledge in collaboration with peers); student–staff engagement; intellectual (being challenged by the academy and challenging themselves); online (the use of web and computer software; to support learning and access resources; to promote independent and self-initiated learning; and to assist communicating and building community); and beyond-class engagement scale (students connecting with each other and the university community in activities beyond the classroom, both social and academic). However, they did recognize that qualitative and on-going measures were required in addition to surveys in order to understand engagement.

Although in 2012 30 Australian and New Zealand universities were still administering the AUSSE, another development has diminished its importance and threatened its future. The Australian government have backed the introduction of a mandatory instrument to measure and compare the ‘quality’ of HE provision. This is the University Experience Survey (UES) which was administered to all 450,000 students (gaining a 25 per cent response rate) in all 40 Australian universities. Although ‘learner engagement’ (with only a handful of questions about that) is one of five dimensions, the other four are much more focused on ‘rating’ the experience, staff and services, akin to the UK National Student Survey (NSS) about ‘student satisfaction’, albeit with the UES having far more items in comparison.

Critiquing this paradigm

This quantitative approach to measure SE may be based on 50 years of research and on well-founded principles. The designers of such survey instruments might not have intended to have the results aggregated or simplified into a single measure or continuum, which infers that judgements can be made about to what extent a student is engaged in their study or student experience, and only offers one snapshot moment to express that. But this simplistic outcome of the application of such instruments raises some methodological and methods considerations, as well as being rather problematic in conceptualising the nature of SE.

The NSSE and its imitators have gained a central position and focus in SE in HE. Such surveys may offer rather more insight than crude instruments, such as the UK NSS, into what universities and colleges are offering students in terms

of achieving ‘good’ HE outcomes. The surveys offer benchmarking and cross-institutional comparison. That has its own dangers, as such measures become appropriated to become a management tool and performance indicator with all its consequent misapplications. But distilling the complex concepts of SE into a survey has some profound problems:

- such surveys can only offer a proxy about levels of SE and the promise of measurement is illusory;
- standardization of questions in pursuit of generalizability loses sensitivity to local contexts and undermines the validity of the responses;
- the closed questions of such surveys give no voice to the student at all. Their perspective is shoehorned to fit, with no opportunity to present an alternative view to any issue.

There is emerging critique about the NSSE within its own methodological paradigm. The construct validity of the five benchmarks has been challenged by LaNasa et al. (2009) who suggests an alternative eight dimensions, undermining the claim to robust psychometric properties. Other researchers who sought to associate the NSSE results with actual outcomes have found little correlation (Carini et al., 2006; Gordon et al., 2008). There are also issues about the variation in interpretation and self-reporting of the items by students, particularly between those in different contexts (Bowman, 2010; Porter, 2009). The AUSSE too has been subject to similar criticism about both its validity and reliability (Hagel et al., 2012).

Moreover, much care has to be exercised in developing dimensions and scales about SE. This is redolent of reductionism on the construct of which earlier researchers, such as Pace and Astin, argued was holistic. These surveys do not uncover the richness and diversity of the student experience, or very much about the perspective of students. Trowler (2010) recently looked at over 1000 items on SE (nearly all based on this paradigm) and found very few where the voice of the student was permitted to emerge.

Alternative perspectives and paradigms

My own research over a 10 year period has involved three phases of work, and the evidence gained has shown SE to be both rather more complex and impossible to ‘measure’. The first phase involved gathering qualitative evidence from students and staff in a single subject school (Bryson and Hand, 2007, 2008) and brought out the extent to which students were disengaged, rather than engaged, and the influences on that. The second phase, a longitudinal study across several subjects and schools, followed students’ entire experiences over three or four years of their degrees, over the period 2007–2011. This evidence is extensively explored and analyzed in a later chapter of this book. The third phase draws on a different student cohort in another university and has been much more an action research

approach over five years of iterations and cycles (Bryson, 2010, 2012, 2013). What these studies have shown, even though the number of students participating is tiny in comparison to the huge data sets of the NSSE, is that each student is individual and unique, and that their individual context is paramount. It has brought out how dynamic and fluid the sense of engagement can be within an individual and also, in some ways, so fragile, but also resilient in other ways. The initial focus of these studies was on academic engagement, on and around the classroom, but the second phase really brought out the salience of the social (Bryson and Hardy, 2012) and the whole lives of students. I have been able to identify a set of key influences on SE from the empirical evidence based on student accounts from these studies. This list has evolved and grown over the phases of research.

Influences on SE as identified by students

- 1 Their aspirations: why they choose to come to university and their goals.
- 2 Student expectations and perceptions about university, being a student and about their subject and degree: as they arrived and as these change during their degree.
- 3 Balances between challenge and appropriate workload.
- 4 Degrees of choice, autonomy, risk, and opportunities for growth and enjoyment.
- 5 Trust relationships between the student and staff, and student and peers.
- 6 Communication and discourse between student and others.
- 7 A sense of belonging and community.
- 8 The existence of supportive social networks.
- 9 Opportunities for, and participation in, activities and roles which empowered the student and gave them a sense of ownership, self-assurance and self-efficacy.

One other key point that emerged from these studies was the different perspectives on SE between students and staff. Generally, staff associated SE with virtuous behaviours (e.g. diligence on academic tasks) but ignored the emotional component of SE. Conversely, students highlighted ‘feeling engaged’ as most important. This mismatch has been explored further (Solomonides and Martin, 2008) and demonstrates the need for staff and students to have a stronger discourse between them and thus shared understanding.

My subsequent investigation of SE literature in the secondary education sector, in which there is much longer tradition of research, emphasized the breadth and depth of SE and emphasized the salience of emotion. Fredricks et al. (2004) noted that:

- SE is multi-dimensional, it is a ‘metaconstruct’, with at least several complex dimensions;
- SE needs to be considered as ‘pattern centred’ not variable centred (ibid.: 87).

Around the same time, Leach and Zepke (2012) developed a conceptual ‘organizer’ with six domains for SE, through reviewing the literature, and then analyzing their own empirical studies:

- 1 Motivation and agency: engaged students are intrinsically motivated and want to exercise their agency.
- 2 Transactional engagement: students and teachers engage with each other.
- 3 Transactional engagement: students engaging with peers.
- 4 Institutional support: institutions provide an environment conducive to learning.
- 5 Active citizenship: students and institutions work together to enable challenges to social beliefs and practices.
- 6 Non-institutional support: students are supported by family and friends to engage in learning.

This model is a genuine attempt to be comprehensive and holistic. Nick Zepke has described it as porous, in the sense that perspectives may overlap and should not be seen as fully distinct domains. Although the model may identify sources or locations where SE might be generated or enhanced, it does not uncover what is going on with these or why they might be important. There are other models which set to do that more explicitly. These shall now be explored.

Ways of being a student

Dubet (1994) derived three dimensions from many empirical studies in France, which he ascribed to ‘ways of being a student’. He contended that the student experience and student identity is constructed, from the combination of:

- The nature of the personal project; what is the purpose or outcome of their degree for them, i.e. why are they at university?
- The degree of integration into university life.
- The level of intellectual engagement with the subject.

Dubet emphasized that the positive or negative emphasis a student gives to these is fluid. The application of Dubet’s model generates eight archetypes from the different combinations of positive or negative attributes. Jary and Lebeau (2009) applied this model to sociology students in UK HE. They found examples of all archetypes in all types of institution (demonstrating more similarities than differences in environment and experience), with the exception of an absence of students who were negative about all three: ‘a case of anomy’. Jary and Lebeau (ibid.) emerged with a rather controversial finding; that all forms of archetype, bar the entirely negative ‘anomy’, are viable. For example, they suggest that students with very low integration or intellectual engagement are nonetheless engaged enough (presumably via the personal project) to be successful.

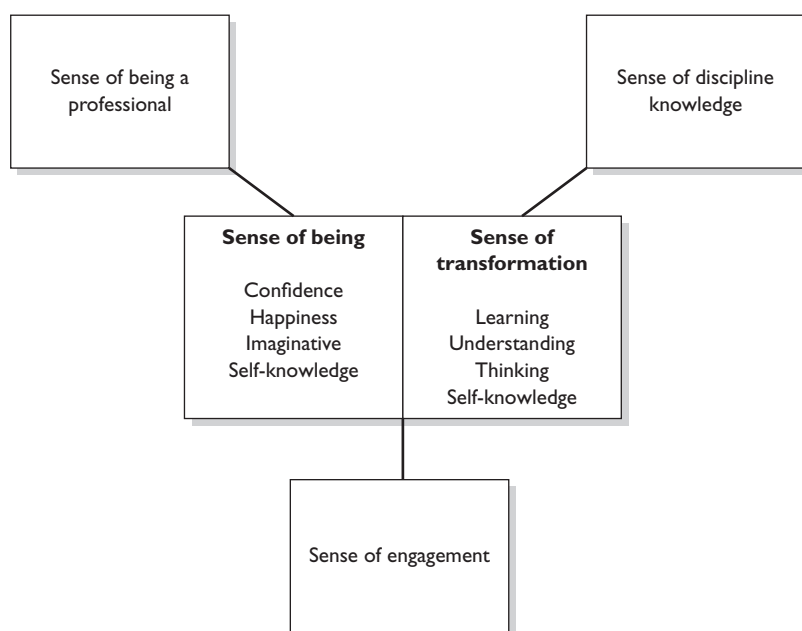


Figure 1.1 Relational student engagement

Source: adapted from Solomonides et al., 2012a.

Dubet's model offers much needed simplicity but obscures important complexity. He ignores context and diversity of students. The application of Dubet's typology seems a little problematic because each dimension (particularly the second) covers a wide area in which there is likely to be a complex mix of positive and negative factors, and ignores the dynamic nature of such domains in relation to the individual.

Relational engagement

Solomonides et al. (2012a) present a different model based on their qualitative research with students. They have particularly emphasized the ontological component of SE; how students develop a sense of self about aspects that are meaningful to them. They have identified that senses of professional formation and of discipline knowledge are likely to be salient (Figure 1.1).

The model is predicated on compelling notions about SE. The notion that SE is located within a sense of being was first devised in collaborative work between Ian Solomonides, Len Hand and me. These thoughts were strongly influenced by Fromm (1978) and the attractive idea that HE is about 'becoming', not 'having'. Thus the notion of 'becoming' permeates this model and all its components. The

work of Barnett (2007) links the ontological with the epistemological through the concept of the ‘will to learn’ (ibid.: 70):

The student’s being, her will to learn, her strong self, her willingness to be authentic: all these are a set of foundations for her knowing and her practical engagements. Without a self, without a will to learn, without a being that has come into itself, her efforts to know and to act within her programme of study cannot even begin to form with any assuredness.

Exploring concepts in detail

There are a host of concepts that link to and underpin the dimensions and notions proposed in these models. These merit further discussion.

Belonging, integration and community

A student’s sense of engagement with their experience is enhanced by feeling part of something: belonging, affiliating and feeling integrated. Tinto (1987) developed a model of student retention in which integration plays a key role in whether the student stays or withdraws. The model theorized that the student arrives in HE with a set of intentions, goals and commitments. These are influenced and reconstructed by the ‘academic’ experience the students perceive themselves to have (progress, performance and the impression gained of the commitment from teaching staff to that student) and by the ‘social’ experience (self-esteem and quality of relationships with peers and staff). Tinto suggested that sufficient integration results in student persistence.

Kember et al. (2001) drew on empirical work from interviews with part-time students to examine the concept of ‘belonging’. The researchers noted that having a stronger affiliation to college and study appeared to enhance both retention and learning outcomes and that the teachers had an important role in enhancing a sense of belonging through establishing a good rapport and strong relationships. This sense of belonging links with earlier themes about involvement, connectedness and the salience of relationships as well as sense of being.

In my own studies, we found that students expressed that there were differing levels or spheres of SE as well as changing degrees of engagement within those spheres (Bryson and Hand, 2007: 359):

- within a classroom or in undertaking a particular task or assignment;
- within/to a particular module;
- within/to and across the course/programme of study;
- within/to the university or HE.

The construction of engagement at each of the levels will affect the other levels in a dynamic manner. We note that for the more ‘local’ levels such as a task,

that engagement with that task might be quite transient given the timescale and nature of the task and that the notion of engagement with education is a much more diffuse concept.

Several of the key players in SE research (Kuh, Tinto and McInnis *inter alia*) have argued that the establishment of learning communities are crucial and that engagement is enriched to a significant degree by establishing a sense of community in the educational setting. Perry (1999) has concluded that although some students could achieve levels of development and independence of thought with very little support, ‘for the majority [. . .] the most important support seemed to derive from a special sense of community [. . .] from reciprocal acts of recognition and confirmation’ (*ibid.*: 238). Wenger (1999) has written extensively on the notion of community, particularly communities of practice, and espoused the importance of situated learning. Therefore, there would appear to be strong potential for SE if students perceive they are part of one or more communities of practice in which they feel competent and which accord with, in Wenger’s terms, their ‘learning trajectory’. McCune (2009) found some support for the existence of this in her study, but other research (Bryson and Hardy, 2010) has found that few students perceive they are part of, or have the opportunity to be part of, a community of practice in their university studies.

Thomas (2012a), based on the findings of a programme of work aimed at enhancing transition, retention and student success, argued that a sense of belonging is created through a responsive interaction between the student and other members of the university community. Thus, trust relationships between all parties are important. She identified a wide range of practices that foster belonging and, therefore, SE. Lefever (2012), in a contributory study to that programme, noted how the way students relate to the campus and ‘spaces’ within that (outside the classroom) influences sense of belonging.

Continuing the theme of the importance of the social dimension, Case (2007), in a South African study, raised the importance of relationships. She found that in addition to salience of students’ relationships with studies, classmates and lecturers that those with broader university life, career and home were as important. She found a range of both engaging and alienating experiences, as a consequence of the degree of support, gained from such relationships.

The importance of integration in the student experience raises sharp questions about the transition process into and through HE, but that will returned to in the discussion of barriers later on.

Transformation

In making the case for students becoming as a goal of HE, we need to consider the question of ‘becoming what?’ Becoming also requires transformation, and this infers transformative and powerful learning, the sort of learning that engages, successfully, with threshold concepts and dealing with ‘troublesome knowledge’ (Meyer and Land, 2003). Therefore, the notion of intellectual and ethical

development is useful, not least because it is one of the key goals of education and enables transformative learning. Two useful models are interlinked and have built on each other (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Perry, 1999). For example, Baxter Magolda's 'ways of knowing' requires students to transform their thinking about others, themselves and how they see the world.

Transforming is difficult because it requires movement out of comfort zones, taking risks and embracing uncertainty. Strong engagement is a prerequisite to that. The more advanced or sophisticated ways of knowing imply an open-mindedness, academic self-confidence, reflexivity and an ability to relate to others which infer that the individual both wishes to engage and is already engaged.

This raises the complex issue of student identities, which is a very major research area in its own right. Indeed, the student's journey to being a graduate can be seen as an 'identity project' (Holmes, 1995). There is insufficient space here to open up this topic properly but the identities that students bring with them to HE, and the malleability of these and the extent to which these are reconstructed while being a student, must impact profoundly on SE. This raises another important sociological concept of social and cultural capital, which also impacts considerably on student's transition and success (Reay et al., 2005).

The relational model of SE also includes professional formation and developing disciplinary knowledge. The latter links to the third dimension of ways of being a student: engagement with the subject of study. Although there has been some research of connections between SE and the development of generic graduate attributes (Reid and Solomonides, 2012) and with professional formation (Reid et al., 2011), this whole area is rather under-researched. For example, does strong SE lead to graduate 'success', however one might wish to define the latter? Clearly these dimensions do link with Dubet's notion of the personal project. Presumably, transformation may reinforce personal project development, or create new personal projects.

So what about the subject and discipline aspect of studying at university? To most academic staff the subject really does matter; arguably it might matter too much, in the view of many students, as they are unlikely to share quite the same degree of enthusiasm and aspiration to become a subject expert in the same way as their lecturers (Brennan et al., 2010). Nonetheless, there are studies which demonstrate the salience of the subject in students' perceptions. McCune (2009) demonstrated that to enhance students' 'willingness to engage', they needed to perceive they were undertaking 'authentic learning experiences'. The example of this she drew on was doing projects and roles in Biology that enabled students to feel they were genuinely undertaking the practices of a professional biologist. Thus, authenticity is engaging through the sense the student has of relevance and alignment to their own aspirations, in her example, 'becoming a scientist'.

McCune developed a model of influences which has much relevance for SE in that it brings out the complex interactions between larger and local environments, communities of practice, 'what the student brings' and how these are

mediated by social practices to create more or less opportunity for a sense of authenticity to be perceived.

Barriers and critiques

Mann (2001) focused on barriers to engagement and the polar opposite of engagement: alienation. Mann (ibid.) provided an insightful and persuasive analysis of powerful forces present in HE which can potentially lead to alienation of the student. She explored the ideas of classical and postmodern theorists to identify several factors present in contemporary universities, such as:

- Too much focus on performativity and functional serving of capitalist society; overemphasis on ‘getting a useful degree’ and employability. Academic discourses which constrain student identities.
- Students are estranged and disoriented by being ‘outsiders in a foreign land’; they are entering an unfamiliar culture with different values and beliefs, which they are forced to adopt to be successful.
- Teachers exert disciplinary power over the student (e.g. through assessment). This combines with the student’s inability to express their own creativity and the point that students have little control or choice over the learning process to create a Marxian ‘exile from the self’.

Such pervasive forces not only create student disengagement, they may also disengage the staff. Even attempts to create a more welcoming community can have adverse effects. Mann (2005) focused on the pressure on the individual student to conform to codes of ‘good student’ behaviour by looking at examples of the communications and norms that occur in online learning communities. She warned of the danger of creating cultural practices that bind teachers and learners to an alienating social order. Zyngier (2008) adopted a rather more critical stance on SE. He challenges the deficit model of the student, where lack of engagement is seen as a problem *with the students*, i.e. that *they* need to change. He noted the contribution of gender, socio-economic, ethnic and class factors. He strongly opposed any interpretation of engagement as compliance, where students who do not conform are seen as disengaged. He was even sceptical of participation and involvement, and contends that may be compliance too.

Thus, as noted before, transition into HE becomes a vital stage. A student entering and experiencing HE encounters a culture where the beliefs and values of the members are likely to be very different from their previous experience and therefore present challenges and tensions (Ylijoki, 2000). Not only is the student under pressure to adopt the moral order of the academic discipline, in order to be accepted by the academics, but they have joined a new and unknown social group of fellow students that become significant others in the construction of their social identity, offering more scope for alienation.

Krause (2005) found related issues. She described ‘inertia’ among students which she prefers to disengagement because it is not active, ‘which aptly depicts the state of being for the group of students who do not actively pursue opportunities to engage in their learning community’ (ibid.: 7). She considered these students at risk of withdrawal, suggesting that even if they remain they will not benefit from HE. But she also noted another group (ibid.: 9): ‘for some students engagement with the university experience is like engaging in a battle, a conflict [...] the culture of the institution is foreign [...] alienating and uninviting’. Such students are likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds or be international. Her point is that such students are not unwilling to engage; indeed they may be trying hard to do so but find that the staff and institution are not prepared to accommodate their perspectives.

Other researchers have also raised concerns about taking too positive a tone with SE. Honkimaki et al. (2004: 447) noted ‘that not even pedagogical innovations can make all students do their best’ because some students were not responsive to interventions. Hockings (2010) found that a student-centred approach failed to engage some 30 per cent of students in her study. On further investigation, she found that this supposedly good approach had: ‘challenged their approaches to and conceptions of learning, their conceptions of knowledge and ways of knowing and we challenged their sense of self. By challenging them we created an environment which engaged some students’ identities and distanced others’ (ibid.: 96). Similarly, Zepke and Leach (2005) argued that academics should not seek to force integration on students but meet them part way by acknowledging their pre-existing cultural values and beliefs, a view echoed by Bryson and Hand (2008).

Hockings (ibid.) did not suggest we give up, but that we need to adopt wider considerations of SE, sociological and epistemological aspects, in addition to approaches to learning, in order to open a dialogue with students on how to engage *all* of them. Hockings, in a subsequent study, identified ‘artisan teachers’ as those who deploy teaching approaches which enabled students to ‘bring their own lives to bear on the subject of their learning making it personally meaningful, relevant and engaging to them’ (2011: 4). The crucial point here is about creating the opportunity for students to bring and share their own experiences and perceptions into the classroom.

This exemplifies the need to recognize heterogeneity among students as the application of universal remedies to address SE will not succeed (Haggis, 2004).

Collective engagement

There is a whole focus of SE which is rather different from any of the discussion so far. This focus has a prominent position in the UK for a number of reasons. The English HE funding council have privileged ‘student representation as SE’ through commissioned work by Little et al. (2009) and subsequent imperatives. The Quality Assurance Agency (2012), in its Quality Code which all universities are expected

to adhere to, acknowledges that SE may be defined as: ‘Improving the motivation of students to engage in learning and to learn independently’, but emphasizes a second definition to be applied to quality practices: ‘The participation of students in quality enhancement and quality assurance processes, resulting in the improvement of their educational experience.’

Thus this approach to SE is about the collective role of students and their opportunities to influence the broader student experience through representation and involvement in governance and decision making (an ‘industrial relations model’) gaining student feedback, via questionnaires or student representation on committees, as part of the individual university’s quality assurance framework. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) also privileged this definition in its initial policy on SE.

However, the HEA (2010), in collaboration with the National Union of Students (NUS), has transformed this focus on the collective to an emphasis on the partnership approach, which has enabled more inclusive and wider work on students involved at every level, e.g. in co-designing modules (NUS, 2010).

Healey et al. (2010: 22) proposed a framework for this form of SE:

- Micro: engagement with their own learning and that of other students.
- Meso: engagement in quality assurance and enhancement processes.
- Macro: engagement in strategy development.

This chapter is focused on the nature of individual engagement. We can note that student involvement and empowerment can create opportunities to foster student engagement both in those who take such opportunities up, and in the impact that these students and their work has on other students. Indeed, there are good examples later on in this volume of students acting to enhance SE within themselves, and in other students. In the final chapter, I will review that and look in detail at the emerging and growing phenomenon of ‘students as partners’ and its potential to integrate individual and collective student engagement.

Making sense of all this

I have sought to present a selection of the literature on SE and related topics based on useful conceptions that commentators have proposed, and/or compelling evidence. There are many, many ideas there and they demonstrate the variety of lenses that researchers have taken to this complex topic. However, some common themes emerge and these are offered below:

- Engagement is about both processes and outcomes.
- Engagement is socially constructed and reconstructed by the student and through the interactions they have with others and the environment.
- SE is broader than just about the academic and university environment – students need to make sense of their whole lives not just part of their identities.

- SE is much more than just about *doing*. *Being* and *becoming* are critical. At the heart of SE lie ontological considerations, although there are epistemological considerations too.
- SE is desirable for many reasons, but in HE what it offers is transformative learning. Through transformative learning SE is enhanced, leading to a virtuous circle of formation and development.
- SE is located in the individual and requires research approaches which bring out rich pictures.
- It is multi-dimensional and there are a host of issues and factors that influence SE. These are not amenable to reductionism (because it is their interaction and synergy that is important), thus a holistic perspective is needed and focus on patterns (idiographic rather than nomothetic).
- SE is dynamic and fluid. Although some aspects are resilient, others are fragile and this varies between individuals.
- Great caution must be exercised in seeking to judge whether an individual *is engaged* (and even harder to judge *how much*) because it is quality rather than quantity that is important.

A revised definition of student engagement might look something like this:

Student engagement is about what a student brings to Higher Education in terms of goals, aspirations, values and beliefs and how these are shaped and mediated by their experience whilst a student. SE is constructed and reconstructed through the lenses of the perceptions and identities held by students and the meaning and sense a student makes of their experiences and interactions.

As players in and shapers of the educational context, educators need to foster educationally purposeful SE to support and enable students to learn in constructive and powerful ways in order to realize their potential in education and society.

Whatever method we use to study SE, we need to problematize the issues. There has been rather a lot of research which, though it may appear ‘robust’ in a narrow definition of the term, has not done this. Krause (2005: 4) critiques the student involvement paradigm as ‘a positive and largely unproblematic theorizing of student engagement. In fact, student engagement is much more problematic than such a paradigm would suggest.’ For example, it is clear that attempts at offering and ‘doing’ engagement are not enough to engage all students and requires much more considered approaches – approaches that consider what the individual brings, perceives and feels, desires and aspires to.

I suggest that part of the problem may arise, at least in part, because of the paradigmatic definition of SE that is dualistic, i.e. what both students *and* institutions do. Although I understand that it is the interactions of these aspects that are

important, I propose that in seeking conceptual clarity, they should be separated into two distinct spheres: ‘Engaging Students’ and ‘Students Engaging’.

Engaging students

This is about what the staff and other parties offer in creating opportunities for students to engage in educationally purposeful ways – to ‘become’ and develop transformatively. In order to achieve that, we need to consider wider issues so that we ensure we accommodate these in our offerings. We need to be mindful of all the alienating forces on individuals, and the context, and then mitigate these. The need to be inclusive to accommodate diversity argues for a set of principles, rather than any form of prescription. So offering a repertoire of approaches is as important as all these pet innovative ideas! I propose an agenda that puts engaging students at the centre of what we do and aligning all that we do with that.

These principles are not new ones. I have drawn on the excellent ideas from the literature covered earlier, as these are informed by what many students have responded to in such positive ways already (e.g. Bryson and Hand, 2008; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Krause, 2005; Mann, 2001; Zepke and Leach, 2010).

We should:

- 1 Foster students’ willingness and readiness to engage by enhancing their self-belief.
- 2 Embrace the point that students have diverse backgrounds, expectations, values, orientations and aspirations, thus different ‘ways of being a student’, and to welcome, respect and accommodate all of these in an inclusive way.
- 3 Enable and facilitate trust relationships (between staff and students, and students and students) in order to develop a discourse with each and all students and to show solidarity with them.
- 4 Create opportunities for learning (in its broadest sense) communities, so that students can develop a sense of competence and belonging within these communities.
- 5 Teach in ways to make learning participatory, dialogic, collaborative, authentic, active and critical.
- 6 Foster autonomy and creativity, and offer choice and opportunities for growth and enriching experiences in a low risk and safe setting.
- 7 Recognize the impact on learning of non-institutional influences and value positive influences and accommodate or mitigate negative influences.
- 8 Design and implement assessment for learning with the aim to enable students to develop their ability to evaluate critically the quality and impact of their own work.
- 9 Work in partnership with students at every opportunity by seeking to negotiate and reach a mutual consensus with students on managing workload, challenge, curriculum and assessment for their educational enrichment,

without diluting high expectations and educational attainment, by developing mechanisms for all students to democratically participate in all aspects of the university that impacts directly or indirectly on them.

- 10 Enable students to become active citizens and develop their social and cultural capital.

Note that the principles are not just antecedents or influences on engagement; they are about creating a virtuous circle in which opportunities are offered (by the conscious effort of the staff) and enabled (by the appropriate wider environment being aligned with this and working with the grain rather than against it). This doesn't just foster student engagement but creates deeper interactions and new relationships that then change the community in fruitful ways. Therefore, it behoves us as educators to put student engagement at the very centre of what we think and do.

Students engaging

This has elements of process, agency and outcome, as it is dynamic and volatile. It is located within the being of the individual. The multi-dimensional nature of the concept and the diversity and variety of relevant concepts makes constructing a conceptual map rather challenging. SE is invisible and elusive to grasp. We can never see more than part of the picture and that picture is likely to change. It is a real hurdle to validity and reliability and a caution to placing too much faith in its manifestations.

Previous attempts to capture and map all the elusive complexities of the 'meta-construct' that is student engagement have not succeeded and tend to be coloured by the philosophical stance of the cartographer. Therefore, the I-E-O model from Astin (1991) is redolent with a reductionist approach (with 200 plus variables) and underplays the *pattern* nature of SE. It may attempt to be holistic, but it is not enough to be comprehensive as there is insufficient synthesis and interaction. The same can be said of the NSSE and the AUSSE.

The loose framework of Leach and Zepke (2012) has merit but does not seem to cover all the required ground, such as broader but important environmental and contextual influences, and some categories are rather vague. The more ontological 'sense of being' offers a different perspective (Solomonides et al., 2012a). The focus on being, becoming and transformation is a great contribution to conceptualising SE but, again, the model does not seem to cover the full scope of SE with full clarity. It fails to unpack the engagement 'component' and neglects components identified as important in other research. The sociological approach of Dubet (1994) and 'ways of being a student' may appear simple and straightforward but seems very difficult to apply with validity and reliability to evidence. It lacks sufficient nuance and, once again important dimensions are missing: there is nothing on the socio-cultural issues or on context (which Dubet deliberately omitted as he did not consider that they had any impact, in contrast to the view of so many other commentators).

Kahu (2013) has proposed an overarching conceptual framework. The introduction of this has been reserved to this point because her review of the literature and the structuring of the argument is of such excellent quality. This stems from the breadth of coverage of concepts and its relatively recent nature; it can draw on such a wide body of work from different traditions and paradigms. Kahu (*ibid.*: 758) set out her position thus:

[. . .] a key problem is a lack of distinction between the state of engagement, its antecedents, and its consequences. While there is some overlap, four relatively distinct approaches to understanding engagement can be identified in the literature: the behavioural perspective, which focuses on teaching practice and student behaviour; the psychological perspective, which views engagement as an internal individual process; the sociocultural perspective, which considers the critical role of sociocultural context; and finally a holistic perspective, which strives to draw the strands together.

She contended that each of the first three perspectives is too narrow and that ‘holistic’ perspectives have confused antecedents (the influences on SE) and the ‘state of engagement’. She then constructed a complex framework which locates all the issues into one, with macro socio-cultural surrounding the whole model which is ‘embedded within’ them:

- 1 Structural influences (more external to the student).
- 2 Psychosocial influences (including university, relationships and student variable) at its core.
- 3 The state of engagement (based on the ‘psychological perspective’: affect, cognition and behaviour).
- 4 Proximal consequences (academic and social).
- 5 Distal consequences (more indirect academic and social).

The model is more inclusive of all the issues and concepts that permeate the complex multi-construct of SE than any of the others that exist. However, it underplays the important and central concept of becoming and transforming. The model is also undermined by two other considerations. There is a strong element of linearity and discreteness, not enabling the framework to adequately describe the holistic reality of the individual, their experiences and how they make sense of that within an educational setting. Secondly, and even more importantly, Kahu critiques the notion that SE is both a process and an outcome, but then in the model states of engagement is an outcome, whilst contradicting herself in the conclusion by describing it as process.

I have contended here that student engagement is both a process and an outcome: it has features of both. My metaphor here is quantum mechanics, where one cannot measure all the properties of a particle, or even determine if it is particle or a wave. Zepke (2011: 9) has suggested the application of complexity

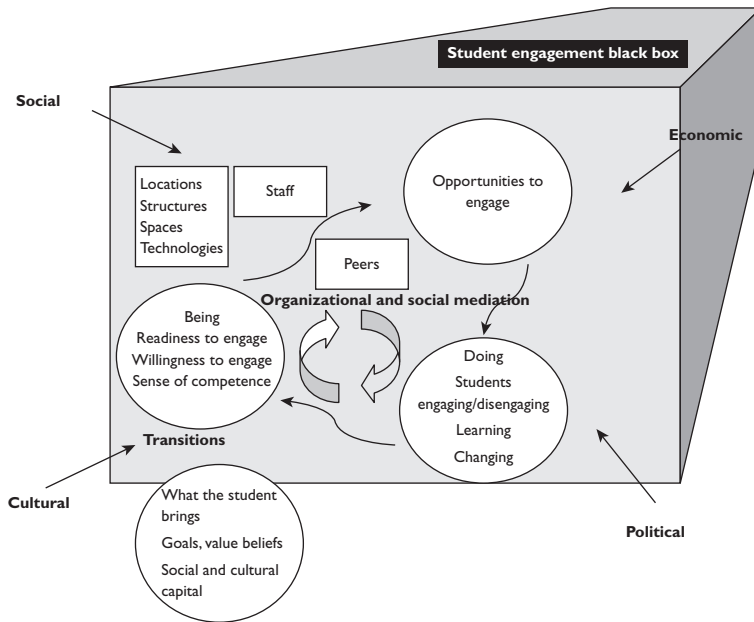


Figure 1.2 A part of the conceptual map of engagement: the dynamic cycle

theory to SE. This notion of a dynamic, interconnected, non-hierarchical network in which all the issues and factors are both distinct but also connected is useful, but makes it even more problematic to clarify and map the conceptual nature of engagement.

It is the complex interactions and the constructivist nature of SE that prevents a conceptual map being drawn which shows all its properties. In addition, the dynamism and volatility at the level of the individual, allied to the rather tricky issue that as soon as the researcher interacts with the individual student in a meaningful discourse that the evidence about SE amenable to being gathered is likely to change, challenges clarity.

I offer the heuristic device of the black box. This is not a three dimensional box but contains rather more dimensions. We can slice this in a number of ways to produce a two or three dimensional cross section that shows some of the conceptions and how they might be 'associated'. However, we cannot illustrate all of them at once and it would serve no real purpose in doing so. The different models and linked concepts identified in previous research are likely to appear in this (but not in the same slice). One slice might look like Figure 1.2. Other slices might indicate: spheres/levels of SE; key influences in detail; some insight into patterns of SE within an individual at a given moment in time; et cetera.

We should be relaxed about the outcome that this complex idea is not reducible, or even possible to depict as a universal synthesis. Such is its very nature. But that does not lessen its critical importance in education and the fact that it sheds light on productive and positive ways of engaging students – such a worthwhile enterprise for all in HE. Therefore, any researcher or evaluator of student engagement can choose concepts and aspects of SE to explore. They should be mindful of the issues and arguments made in this chapter, but that should not inhibit their enquiry. So many of these studies have the beneficial effect of enhancing engagement through focusing on it and creating a potential discourse between students and staff, students and students and staff and staff. Some care needs to be exercised with surveys in this regard! However, we should never claim that we can measure engagement or create policies based on such a false premise.

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