

## Critical perspectives on student engagement as ‘what students do’ (0138)

Peter Kahn

University of Liverpool, UK

### **Abstract**

The student engagement movement has been critiqued for privileging public performances in learning. Gourlay has argued that this movement promotes verbal and communal participation at the expense of textual and solitary practices. McFarlane has contended that students are expected to comply with rules on attendance, interact in assessments, and display desired forms of emotional development. In allowing positional considerations to frame their analyses so fully, however, dispositional considerations are downplayed. And yet if one sees emancipation as a transformation from unwanted to wanted sources of determination, dispositional considerations remain keenly important to students’ freedom to learn. We explore a critical realist account of agency in student learning by Kahn. The account recognises constraints on learning, and in this we can learn from these positional critiques, but it also considers the role of internal deliberation or reflexivity, and the way that it underpins social relations and an emancipatory agenda in learning.

### **Introduction**

The student engagement movement has been the subject of significant critical attention recently for privileging public performance at the expense of a wider consideration of what students do while learning. Gourlay (2015) has argued that this movement has ignored the importance of textual and solitary practices, and instead promoted observable forms of participation. Macfarlane (2015), meanwhile, has drawn attention to ways in which students are expected to comply with rules on class attendance, actively interact with each other, and display desired forms of emotional development. As a result, he argued that a culture of surveillance has come to the fore in higher education.

### **A focus on ‘what students do’**

These accounts place particular emphasis on what might be termed positional considerations. The account by Gourlay (2015) is grounded in a sociomaterial view of learning, which sees education as constituted by complex networks of actors, resources and surroundings that are continually being re-configured. She argued that many actions in learning are textual and private, rather than straightforwardly open to observation. As with the account by Fenwick, Nerland and Jensen (2012), though, the emphasis on materiality serves to downplay human intentionality in learning. Meanwhile, Macfarlane (2015) argued that we have seen a subversion of Carl Rogers’ vision of student-centred learning, with a focus on participation resulting in restrictive notions of acceptable student practice. He contended that constraints on student practice have contributed to a greater emphasis on preparation for employment in higher education. Given that it has long been assumed that higher education is primarily about the emancipation of students, such a shift is matter of concern.

However, if one sees emancipation as a transformation from unwanted to wanted sources of determination (Bhaskar, 1993) then dispositional considerations

remain important to students' freedom to learn. Such considerations remain important also in the earlier argument of Barnett (1990) that the overall project of higher education involves students acquiring greater capacity for critical self-reflection and readiness to question what is taken for granted. If we primarily just attend to structural considerations then we would suggest a weaker basis exists from which to address emancipatory concerns. Archer (2003, 2), indeed, has suggested that arguments which conceptualise relations between the positional and the dispositional as inextricably intertwined are 'hostile to the very differentiation of subject and object that is indispensable to agential reflexivity towards society.'

### **A critical realist account of agency in student learning**

We thus explore a critical realist account of agency in student learning (Kahn, 2014) that is grounded in Archer's account of the interplay between structure and agency. Critical realism itself constitutes a paradigm that offers a non-reductive explanatory critique (Bhaskar, 1993). Archer (2003) argued that human agency operates through an extended process, by which agents are first of all placed in given structural settings that constrain and enable their actions. She contended that within such settings, scope remains for individuals to establish their own concerns, before then configuring both courses of action and on-going practices, with this process driven by the ordinary mental capacity to consider oneself in relation to different social contexts, namely reflexivity (Archer, 2003).

Kahn (2014) argued that we can use this model to frame student engagement as learners establishing concerns within given educational settings and translating these concerns into projects and on-going practices. Kahn (2014) suggested that educational settings specifically include requirements for students to engage with specific sets of tasks and social relations, so that the agency entailed needs to be considered on a corporate as well as an individual basis. A central point of contention, then, is the extent to which there is scope for human intentionality to shape learning in different ways within constrained settings. Gourlay (2015), indeed, provides an extended critique of the account by Kahn (2014) on this basis.

Archer (2003) suggested that the prioritisation of different sets of concerns alongside experiences of social continuity or discontinuity can lead one to adopt a distinctive mode of reflexivity, with different outcomes for social mobility emerging as a result. An empirical study by Kahn et al (2015), though, has suggested that learners need to manifest a range of modes of reflexivity in response to structural constraints, rather than rely on a single dominant mode of reflexivity as Archer had seen in relation to social mobility. It is clear that there are significant constraints on the reflexivity required to navigate learning, so that a full consideration of social structures is important.

However, Kahn (2014) explored the scope for students to manifest modes of extended reflexivity, contrasting this with both the restricted reflexivity that involves formulaic stances and the fractured reflexivity that does not directly progress intentional courses of learning. Kahn (2014) also argued that there is a clear element of uncertainty in the way that students respond to such tasks and social relations, and that this allows for a range of responses. Archer (2003) specifically highlighted the role that uncertainty plays in triggering reflexivity. Such forms of reflexivity highlight how agency in learning is affected by the

extent to which learning is prioritised in relation to other projects, and also by the extent to which it aligns with their concerns. Choices remain as to whether one remains as a student, how much time is devoted to one's studies, and where and how one studies. This touches on student aspirations in relation to learning. A readiness to learn cannot be assumed simply because a student has entered a particular network of activity. Such considerations are not directly observable or amenable to a culture of surveillance, however, the role of human intentionality in underpinning student engagement and the emancipator dimension of learning is nonetheless apparent.

## Conclusions

While sociomaterial approaches and other approaches that focus on the behaviours of students are helpful in explaining structural influences on the activity of students, it is essential also to attend to the role that human intentionality plays in learning. Structure is not simply relegated to background context in our account, but remains as an integral aspect of theorising. If higher education is to serve the needs and aspirations of students, it is important directly to address the emancipatory dimensions to learning.

## References

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