Student Engagement Practices *- The Higher Education Journey*

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ABSTRACT: As social learning approaches and networks become familiar at all levels and in many sectors of education, dissemination of innovative methods can help inform the processes for ensuring an engaging and employability led learning experience for students. Student engagement and employability are key elements in the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) quality code for Higher Education in the UK. However, every teaching team in HE should support this approach whether it was the central plank of H.E. in the UK, because it is a central part of a strategic philosophy and practice. The creation of suitable learning architectures and social structures to support an increasingly demanding set of diverse and international students is the focus and continuing challenge. This paper describes the project of enhancing students' learning experience in an international, diverse HE environment that operates in a blended delivery mode. The paper will explore in relation to Wenger's work on communities of practice (COPS) the building of this community of six faculty members within an HE Institution and also the core curriculum design and techniques to enhance engagement and employability. A community of practice is seen by Wenger (1988:126) as a "community of mutual engagement, a negotiated enterprise, and a repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time" and we need to focus down on the social learning processes for staff and students.

KEYWORDS: *student engagement, student involvement, higher education, communities of practice, QAA, United Kingdom.*

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Introduction

As social learning approaches and networks become familiar at all levels and in many sectors of education, dissemination of innovative methods can help inform the processes for ensuring an engaging and employability led learning experience for students. Student engagement and employability are key elements in the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) quality code for Higher Education in the UK. However, every teaching team in HE should support this approach whether or not it was the central plank of H.E. in the UK, because it is a central part of a strategic philosophy and practice.

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Learning Architectures

The essential starting point for every academic team in HE is the careful consideration of a 'design space' for an innovative, engaging and employability led education is Wenger's (1998: 231–236) dialogue on learning architectures. The term 'learning community' became popular among educators in the 1990s. Graves emphasized the importance of social relationships between experts and learners, and the new roles assumed by all players. For example, teachers were encouraged to step back from their usual role of expert, and to act instead as facilitators and co-participants who can display ignorance as well as knowledge. A strong learning community fosters interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust. It creates a social structure for individuals to share ideas and artefacts (e.g., stories, documents, recordings) that

support community activities and help individuals make sense of new knowledge. Newcomers can benefit from having access to the archived material in addition to the experience of and mentoring from experts. These conditions provide a rich environment for individuals to share information and ways to apply new knowledge in practice. This conceptually driven set of elements is seen as the building blocks within the community to allow for the creation of the most effective design for a learning situation. Wenger highlights four core aspects—meaning, time, space, and power. These can be viewed through the lenses of four underpinning dualities: participation versus reification, design versus emergence, local versus global and identification versus negotiability. These dualities, determine the scope within the space in which the learning framework can be developed.

It is worth reiterating that it is social learning processes that underscore Wenger's view of how practice develops, and that individual contribution and identity is bound up in the process as they engage in the community. Much of the interaction is about development of shaping one's identity and ideas within the community and acceptance of these. The ability to embed new meaning and practices adds to the dynamics and evolution of the community in what is an understood and owned shared enterprise. It has its own artefacts, language, and protocols for example. Influence from outside the community can enter from boundary crossers who connect to other self-contained communities or external sources of influence.

Wegner (1998) described Communities of Practice as an entity bounded by three interrelated dimensions: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. 'Mutual engagement' represents the interaction between individuals that leads to the creation of shared meaning on issues or a problem. 'Joint enterprise' is the process in which people are engaged and working together toward a common goal. Finally, 'shared repertoire' refers to the common resources and jargons that members use to negotiate meaning and facilitate learning within the group. The three dimensions attempt to outline the process of individuals' interactions within communities of practice groups.

Understanding Engagement

Our understanding of the term 'student engagement', based on definitions in the literature and the discussion of the character of engagement and its alternatives, summarized below, is as follows:

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.

The term 'student engagement' has its historic roots in a body of work concerned with student involvement, enjoying widespread currency particularly in North America and Australasia, where it has been firmly entrenched through annual large scale national surveys. The most prolific authors (in particular, George Kuh and Hamish Coates) have affiliations with the organizations that have developed, implemented, and supported these national surveys of student engagement, located variously within universities or private companies. By way of contrast, the body of work produced in the UK which could be said to address student engagement traces its roots back to other traditions, such as student feedback, student representation and student approaches to learning, and is less likely to be tagged as 'student engagement' in the authors' keywords. Because of this, the literature flagged as 'student engagement' is heavily skewed towards the North American/Australasian tradition, with the exception of an emerging body of 'grey' literature from the UK concerned mainly with small, single case studies.

Dimensions of Engagement

Engagement is more than involvement or participation – it requires feelings and sense making as well as activity (see Harper and Quaye, 2009a: 5). Acting without feeling engaged is just involvement or even compliance; feeling engaged without acting is dissociation. Although focusing on engagement at a school level, Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004: 62-63), drawing on Bloom (1956), usefully identify three dimensions to student engagement, as discussed below:

 1. Behavioral engagement. Students who are behaviorally engaged would typically comply with behavioral norms, such as attendance and involvement, and would demonstrate the absence of disruptive or negative behavior.

 2. Emotional engagement. Students who engage emotionally would experience affective reactions such as interest, enjoyment, or a sense of belonging.

 3. Cognitive engagement. Cognitively engaged students would be invested in their learning, would seek to go beyond the requirements, and would relish challenge.

It is proposed that each of these dimensions can have both a 'positive' and a 'negative' pole, each of which represents a form of engagement, separated by a gulf of non-engagement (withdrawal, or apathy). The terms 'positive' and 'negative' are used here

not to denote value judgment, but rather to reflect the attitude implied in much of the literature that compliance with expectations and norms indicates internalization and approval, and is thus seen to be productive, whereas behavior that challenges, confronts or rejects can be disruptive, delaying, or obstructive, thus seen to be counterproductive. This is not to deny that, for individual academics, evidence of critical engagement among their students is viewed as a positive indicator of success.) Thus, one can engage either positively or negatively along the behavioral, emotional, or cognitive dimensions.

Dualities

Wenger defines dualities as essentially a tension between two opposite forces that drive the change and creative engine of the community. Wenger states (1998:66) "*A duality is a single conceptual unit that is formed by two inseparable and mutually constitutive elements whose inherent tension and complementarity give the concept a richness and dynamism.*"

Practice is considered as 'a set frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories, and documents' (Wenger et al., 2002: 29). According to Wenger (1998), Communities of practice members' negotiation of meanings in practice leads to the development of three structural elements of Communities of Practice: mutual engagement (how and what people do together as part of practice), joint enterprise (a set of problems and topics that they care about), and shared repertoire (the concepts and artifacts that they create). In Communities of Practice, 'belonging is enacted through the mutual engagement, sharing of repertoires, and negotiation of the joint enterprise(s)' (Iverson, 2011: 43).

Participation and Reification

In terms of communities of practice this duality of participation and reification allows for the development of meaning for the community. Meaning for individuals is generated through the praxis of participation and sense making of process of reducing more complex activities to a broad concept –reification.

As Wenger points out (1998: 231-232) out participation and reification are complementary continuum elements of design that allows for the negotiation of meaning for the individuals. In this sense, there are two aspects that one can explore.

1. *"One can make sure that some of the artifacts are in place-tools plans, procedures, schedules, curriculums-so that the future will have to be organised around them."* And

2. *"One can make sure that the right people are at the right place and in the right kind of relation to make something happen"*

Engaging students in their own learning experience.

Students should be engaged in instructional activity with faculty and peers. Some of the major advantages of an engaging teaching and learning strategy include:

•   Provide students with the opportunity to study one content area intensely and master it without distractions from other subjects.

•   In-depth study, such as individual student projects, peer collaboration, and one-on-one work between lecturers and students.

•   Fewer failing grades, dropout rates and discipline problems.

•   Students are exposed to a variety of instructional techniques.

•   The inclusion of projects and activities that facilitate both learning and interpersonal communication.

•   Field Trips to meet specific Learning Outcomes.

•   Interactive sessions. Students are seen as equal partners in education. A number of class activities, group work and short presentations. Students learn how to work in teams and overcome any barriers of culture and language. All students are encouraged to contribute to all class activities.

•   Online sessions with specialists from different specialties and countries.

•   Use of the surrounding environment as Laboratory. Students have the chance to do their own research choosing their case organization. This then is tied up to their assignments.

•   Use of technology (Viber - WhatsApp - Skype) to keep students active and fully engaged. Lecturers suggest the class motivator. His/her duties include to remind classmates about assignments deadlines and unit milestones. A viber / whatsapp group is created and acts as a platform of communication for all students for selected classes.

•   Class Debates that allow students to raise their voice and interact with other students.

- Interesting videos to highlight essential module concepts and satisfy different learning styles. Students are always encouraged to bring their own videos in class and generate discussion.

- The usage of a 'breaking news' story where a contemporary issue is flagged to the participants, and it can be linked to a particular concept or model relative to the current work. The participants would need to analyse and transfer conceptual knowledge to this live situation, and not that of a sterile historic case.

- Lecturers create their own reading material to enhance students' learning experience. Members of academic faculty are doing their PhD in different areas. They do have very good publication and research record. This benefits students that get access to personal notes and articles written by their lecturers.

- Alumni students are invited as guest speakers to talk to current students about their work experience and how knowledge and interpersonal skills gained through during their studies helped them with their studies.

- Student retention. A good number of students are staying with the HE Institution after the completion of their degree to pursuit further studies.

Philosophy: Structured and Engaging Methods

To have a significant impact, class sizes need to be sufficiently small to allow an interactive and personalized teaching style. Academics can interact with the class and oversee individuals' learning. This greater degree of personalized interaction will lead to the student being more interested in the subject and therefore more engaged in classes, thereby creating a virtuous cycle of learning and positive feedback. Evidence suggests that students learn more when classes are small. They progress through the material more quickly and they soon develop confidence to express their ideas and opinions without fear of scorn and retribution from their peers.

Designed and Emergence

The duality elements of design and emergence highlights time as a conduit for decisions based on pre-planning and emergent thinking processes from engagement. Thus, it could take the community in new directions and away from the original conception seen by the designers/progenitors. Thus, it gives the opportunity for participants to renegotiate meaning.

As Wenger states (1988:233), *"in a world that is not predictable, improvisation and innovation are more than desirable, they are essential. The relation of design to practice is always indirect. It takes place through the on-going definition of an enterprise by the community pursuing it. In other words, practice cannot be the result of design, but instead constitutes a response to design."*

Identification and Negotiability

The duality element of identification and negotiability has at its heart the notion of identity and the power/confidence of individuals to input and shape the direction of travel from the original design. As Wenger states (1998:235), *"as a process of colonizing time and space, design requires the power to influence the negotiation of meaning…inherent in the process of design is the question of how the power to define, adapt, or interpret the design is distributed."*

As time progresses, academic team members should start exploring new approaches and feel confident in taking them forward. Their identity and influence will be certainly increased.

Meeting Quality Assurance Authority's (QAA) Standards.

QAA sees students as equal partners in education. In this context QAA expects empowerment and involvement of students in the teaching process and overall experience. Every HE Institution should set as a primary objective to comply fully with QAA's expectations and stay up to date with any new policies.

QAA Points on Student Engagement.

According to the data that QAA has gathered students are mainly interested in:
1. Academic support
2. Direct contact with tutors
3. Effective career services
4. Opportunities to receive personalised feedback
5. Student led teaching awards
6. Progression in challenge of assignment
7. Clear marking criteria
8. Library facilities

9. Learning resources (Including staff)
10. VLE
11. Early issue of timetables

HE Institutions should respond to all above points offering academic support, career services, personalized feedback, an interactive VLE (Moodle) etc.

Some examples of *'you asked - we acted'* according to QAA:
1. Rewriting an unpopular module
2. Co-operation of syllabuses
3. Student Reps having more responsibility for cross institute projects
4. A curriculum innovation programme

HE Institutions should respond to requests about timetables, assessment numbers, class activities etc.

From Student Welfare to Student Experience:

What are the main indicators to measure student services' performance? Below are the top 21 student responses to the above question:
1. Counselling
2. Disability
3. Mental health (Support)
4. General advice
5. Clear Policies
6. Dyslexia support
7. Financial advice
8. Hardship funding
9. Health promotion
10. Care Learner + Chaplaincy
11. Safeguarding
12. Health screening
13. Suspensions
14. Student engagement
15. Student retention
16. Wellbeing
17. Peer mentoring
18. Non-Academic appeals

19. Student enterprise
20. Student placement
21. Student recruitment

Good Practice Points

Various good practices that HE Institutions need to implement and contributed to the enhancement of student experience, increasing involvement and engagement. Evidence suggested that students are very happy with their experience, involvement, and engagement as long as the Institution sees student as "equal partners in education" and always seeks ways to enhance student experience. Below are listed some very good examples of how HE Institutions enhance the quality of students' experience:

1. Student feedback on teaching. Mid semester and end of teaching evaluation guarantees that students rate their learning experience, and they can make suggestions or raise any issues that feel they are important.

2. Developing Reciprocity and Cooperation among Students. Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive, and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions sharpens thinking and deepens understanding.

3. Encouraging Active Learning. Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.

4. Giving Prompt Feedback. Knowing what you know and don't know focuses learning. Students need appropriate feedback on performance to benefit from courses. When getting started, students need help in assessing existing knowledge and competence. In classes, students need frequent opportunities to perform and receive suggestions for improvement. At various points during college, and at the end, students need chances to reflect on what they have learned, what they still need to know, and how to assess themselves.

5. Student rating on induction. Students are able to rate their induction experience.

6. Listen to student's complaints and suggestions (e.g. timetable)

7. Immediate action to student's requests

8. Organisation of social activities.

9. Social media campaigns and competitions organized. In one case students were invited to design the new Institution flag.

10. Sports activities. Football and Basketball usually every second Friday.

11. Student consultative forum and regular informal chats with students (in the corridors, classrooms, etc).

12. Career Services and career advice

13. Field trips and guest speakers. All members of academic faculty contribute significantly in generating and establishing long term relationships with companies and potential guest speakers.

14. HE Newspaper managed by students.

15. Education experience that includes all minorities

16. Availability of staff to meet students and offer personalised feedback

17. Counselling

18. Open door policy.

Good Classroom Practices

1. Be in class (on campus and online) 5 minutes before the class begins. Students that are late need to wait until the first break before entering the class;

2. Everyone, in every group participates in class discussions and activities;

3. Respect each other and do not interrupt when classmates talk; listen attentively to all students' presentations (class activities) and ask questions in the end so meaningful discussions take place;

4. Do not use electronic devices in class - except from research purposes;

5. Provide flexibility on how to work on homework activities and present in class (presentations, role playing etc);

6. 100% student led activities where the tutor was there to observe;

7. Introduction of the "breaking news" activity where students bring in class relevant contemporary articles for discussion;

8. Keep up with the time schedule, - students knew for example that specific activities should start 5 minutes after the class begins. They were all ready and logged in on time in each and every class;

9. Introduction of the "teaching assistant" scheme;

10. Students to send their homework to the tutor's email the night before the seminar;

11. Students to show drafts of their work for their summative assignments on pre-specified days during the term;

12. Use of online learning tools and platforms to fully utilize educational technology.

Conclusion

Deep mutual learning takes place when *thinking together* additionally brings individual thought processes and experiences into the Communities of Practice concept by placing an emphasis on the possibility of developing learning partnerships and a sense of community. Such learning partnerships can be achieved through mutual identification when individuals' tacit knowledge is interlocked: people engaged in thinking together guide one another through their understanding of the same problem. However, this understanding relates not only to technical, practical, or theoretical knowledge (the focus in indwelling), but also to the understanding of the (historical) relationships and communities that are relevant to the given practice.

Integral to the above is the nurturing of student emotional competencies as a key facilitator of personal learning – the refining of ability to recognise, read and act upon own emotions and the emotions of others. Ability to empathise with others, to listen carefully, to recognise and get inside their personal constructs, see their standpoints, and acknowledge underlying assumptions upon which they are construing an issue. And use this understanding to reflect upon and challenge own personal knowledge and experience to be able to effectively' try on the constructs of the other person for size' to 'see if there is anything in it for me'.

And thus, the fostering of student ability to undertake 'learning conversations' (Wyer *et al*, 2010) to facilitate effective reflection on, and challenging of, existing personal constructs and the developing of new constructs: we facilitate learning conversations with lecturer; learning conversations with co-students; learning conversations with practising owner managers. And ultimately, learning conversations with student self, whereby the student progresses to take on full responsibility for ongoing self-learning and self- development.

In short, a nurturing of student as 'enterprising person' – thinking, acting, and behaving like an entrepreneur. The ever more effective and resilient learner prepared for future career and for lifelong learning across all aspects of life.

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