

DEFINING STUDENT

ENGAGEMENT

BY RICK D. AXELSON AND AREND FLICK

Few terms in the lexicon of higher education today are invoked more frequently, and in more varied ways, than *engagement*. None (except perhaps “funding”) is employed more often to describe what institutions want to generate more of. The phrase “student engagement” has come to refer to how *involved* or *interested* students appear to be in their learning and how *connected* they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other. As measured by such instruments as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), the level of student engagement at a particular college or university is increasingly seen as a valid indicator of institutional excellence, more meaningful than such traditional (and more easily measured) characteristics as the number of books in the college library or Nobel laureates on the faculty.

And these days, it’s not just students whose engagement is desired (or whose disengagement is deplored). The concept has inserted itself, meme-like, into the vernacular of an over-stimulated, easily bored culture, with moody baseball players described by sportscasters as unexpectedly “engaged” in games in which they play well. Even US Presidents are attacked by their critics for being insufficiently engaged. The “high cost of disengaged employees” is the topic of a recent Gallup Institute study; the goal of much family therapy has become “sustaining engagement” among family members.

Rick D. Axelson is an assistant professor and faculty consultant for the Office of Consultation and Research in Medical Education (OCRME) at the University of Iowa. Prior to joining OCRME in 2007, he served as the assistant vice provost for institutional research, assessment, and planning at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, where he worked with academic departments on enhancing their program review and assessment processes. Arend Flick is a professor of English and faculty development coordinator at Norco College (CA). He has also served as assessment coordinator for the Riverside (CA) Community College district and has consulted with a number of colleges and universities on the assessment of student learning.



Why should engagement be so serious an issue today, particularly in our colleges and universities? Is it really possible to measure accurately (not to mention strengthen) the dispositions or connections to which the term “student engagement” refers? And what do we mean by the term in the first place?

THE HISTORY OF ENGAGEMENT

Etymologically speaking, the word *engagement* has the interesting history that 500-year-old English words originating in France often do. To “engage” oneself meant to mortgage one’s lands long before it meant agreeing formally to something (marriage, for example), but either way it was serious business, indicating that one was exposing oneself to risk, offering oneself as a guarantor of something promised. The Norman root word, *gage*, from which engagement derives, means “pledge”—as in tying oneself to a course of action by oath. For hundreds of years, an engagement was a moral, often legal, obligation.

As the word evolved, though, the force of the commitment softened. Only fairly recently has “engage” come to mean, more mildly, to “occupy the attention of,” with engagement the condition or act of being so occupied. Today, then, we are “engaged” when we are entirely *present* and not somewhere else.

Depending on how its lineage is traced, the history of “student engagement” as a concept is anywhere from ten to 70 years old. The educational psychologist Ralph Tyler did research in the 1930s, first at Ohio State and later at the University of Chicago, on how much time students spent on their work and tried to show its effects on learning. Later, C. Robert Pace’s research on quality of effort in the 1960s led to the development of the CSEQ, first administered in 1979.

Many historians of education would agree, however, that Alexander Astin’s student involvement research in the 1980s deserves credit for originating what would eventually become modern engagement research. Astin suggested that a student’s involvement (“the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience”) produces learning in direct proportion to that involvement.

“We might ask, “How do we engage (cognitively, behaviorally, and/or emotionally) type X students most effectively in type Y learning processes/contexts so that they will attain knowledge, skill, or disposition Z?””

While not all educational theorists agree that involvement and engagement are the same thing, Astin recently indicated that he sees “no essential differences” between the terms, and former NSSE director at the University of Indiana George Kuh told a recent interviewer that the concepts “are temporal representations of pretty much the same thing.”

THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

In the late 1980s, in an educational climate heavily influenced by the dystopian rhetoric of *A Nation at Risk*, as well as an emerging conviction among educational theorists that student learning is fostered more by processes than by student demographics, Peter Ewell of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems was asked to “develop an instrument to assess the extent to which students take part in empirically derived good educational practices and what they gain from their college experience.” Under the auspices of the Pew Charitable Trusts and the National Center for Educational Statistics, Ewell gathered a team to design this instrument; thus, in 1999 the NSSE was born. It was administered to students at 140 institutions in the first year; more than five times that number participated in 2008.

The NSSE measures “student behaviors highly correlated with many desirable learning and personal development outcomes of college.” These behaviors include such standard college experiences as faculty-student contact, participation in collaborative learning experiences, and number of hours spent per week on homework. Besides student behaviors, the survey assesses “institutional features” thought to correlate with learning, such as a “supportive campus environment.”

The NSSE allows institutions to benchmark their students’ aggregate scores in a host of areas against similar institutions as a way of probing for areas needing improvement. It’s no exaggeration to say of the NSSE that most college teachers and administrators automatically think of it (or its two-year college counterpart, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement) whenever they hear the term “student engagement.”

What exactly, though, is meant by that term? And what is its relationship to student learning? Following up on Astin’s emphasis on involvement, Kuh argues that the “engagement premise is straightforward and easily understood: the more students study a subject, the more they know about it.” He has elsewhere defined engagement as “the extent to which [students] take part in educationally effective practices,” which enlarges the term to include activities besides studying—especially time spent in consultation with instructors.

The NSSE’s definition of engagement suggests that engagement is largely a matter of *behavior* on the part of students, something students can be observed doing. (Astin, remember, had suggested that involvement was as much a psychological as a physical phenomenon.) The NSSE determines how much time students spend engaged in “educationally effective” practices by asking them to estimate their levels of involvement in these activities over the past year.

FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT

One of the problems with such a definition, however, is that it may minimize the importance of less easily observed forms of engagement in the cognitive and emotional realms. Some students, we know, may show outward signs of engagement but actually be mostly detached; some may be deeply curious about their coursework or psychologically invested in it but, for whatever reasons, display few or none of the behavioral traits we associate with engagement.

Behavioral engagement is often implicitly seen as a proxy for emotional and cognitive engagement (not to mention a proxy for learning itself). But it may not be, or not as universally as is sometimes supposed. The biologist Robert Leamson notes that students' "interest in a task is clearly important. Nevertheless, it does not guarantee that students will acquire the kinds of knowledge that will support new learning."

Other critics of the student engagement concept have sometimes suggested that we do damage to the messy reality of student learning if we disaggregate the various forms of engagement from each other, or valorize one of its forms above the other. Some say that student engagement is best understood as a "multidimensional construct" or "metaconstruct."

But there has been little effort to study how the three sorts of engagement—behavioral, emotional, and cognitive—interrelate, or which (if any) could be said to have the primary role in producing learning. This is to say nothing of the complications involved in sorting out how levels, kinds, and results of engagement might differ from student subgroup to subgroup.

Definitions of student engagement are often tangled semantically as well as conceptually. One researcher has said of engagement that it "is an important means by which students develop feelings about their peers, professors, and institutions that give them a sense of connectedness, affiliation, and belonging, while simultaneously offering rich opportunities for learning and development." If this is so, then engagement comes first, leading to a set of emotions ("feelings") that then produces "connectedness." But isn't connectedness a synonym for engagement in the first place?

Engagement is viewed by another theorist as a concept that could provide "a way to ameliorate . . . the high levels of student boredom." This is like saying that good health "ameliorates" illness. (The same authors go on to assert that engagement is "an antidote to . . . student alienation," another unhelpful tautology.) It is no wonder that they conclude that the concept of engagement is "theoretically messy," sometimes "overlap[ping] with other constructs, sometimes . . . simply substitut[ing] different terminology for the same constructs." (The same charge could be made about other popular terms in education today: e.g., *assessment*, *critical thinking*, and *academic freedom*.)

CLARIFYING THE TERM

To sharpen the meaning of *student engagement*, we begin by noting a fundamental conflict between two uses of the term: 1)

as an accountability measure that provides a general index of students' involvement with their learning environments; and 2) as a variable in educational research that is aimed at understanding, explaining, and predicting student behavior in learning environments.

An expansive definition suits the purposes of accountability by consolidating several institutional and student variables into a single measure or index of engagement. However, for use in research and program improvement, it obscures some of the very phenomena and relationships we seek to study (i.e., the various types of engagement and their linkages with learning tasks and learning environments); it makes it difficult to define and measure specific instances of engagement and consequently precludes study of the factors that inhibit and enhance it.

To support the research and program improvement uses of student engagement, we believe that a narrower definition of the term is needed, one that is restricted to students' level of involvement in a learning process. Also, to gain the type of information needed for program improvement purposes, we need to ask more specific questions about student engagement.

At a minimum, we could refine engagement questions by including specific learning goals, learning contexts, types of students, and the processes through which they become engaged. That is, we might ask, "How do we engage (cognitively, behaviorally, and/or emotionally) *type X* students most effectively in *type Y* learning processes/contextes so that they will attain *knowledge, skill, or disposition Z*?"

In 1994, Terenzini et al. observed a similar need for specificity in earlier research regarding the student-learning context connection—i.e., "involvement" and "academic and social integration" (cf. Tinto 1993). They noted that there was extensive evidence about the positive impacts of student involvement in college but little understanding of the personal and organizational processes and mechanisms that bring it about. This observation remains true today. More refined usage of "engagement" would enable us to raise, sharpen, and more effectively address some of the more fundamental questions implicit in the attempts to expand the definition and use of this concept.

Here are two such questions.

Who's Responsible?

If engagement is equated with the time a student spends in educationally effective practices, we should naturally want to do all we can to bring about more of it. But who is responsible for creating and sustaining high levels of student engagement? The institution has been consigned an increasingly large measure of this responsibility.

Another of Kuh's definitions parcels out that responsibility when he suggests that student engagement represents "both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices" (emphasis added). He has also said that engagement involves "aspects of student behavior and institutional performance that colleges and universities can do something about" (emphasis added). Engagement, in these expanded

definitions, is not simply a measure of how involved students are in their learning; it is also an indication of how involving institutions are for their students.

Clearly, students and institutions each have responsibilities for the quality of student learning. Students need to put forth the effort necessary to develop their knowledge and skills, and institutions need to provide the appropriate environments to facilitate student learning. Indeed, this later point is especially important for countering the earlier over-emphasis on student attributes and behaviors as the source of engagement failures.

But the term gets fuzzy when we confuse student engagement with the institutional characteristics that are thought to bring it about. Colleges and universities—and especially the professors in whose classrooms students find themselves—clearly have a large role to play in fostering student engagement. But to speak of engagement as “an aspect of institutional performance” or “how the institution deploys its resources” is a semantic imprecision that hinders analytic uses of the concept.

Trying to encapsulate the two sets of responsibilities within the concept of engagement only serves to obscure the issues we need to address. It conflates the dependent variable (i.e., student engagement) with independent variables (i.e., features of the learning environment) and introduces an implicit explanation for engagement failures: at least one of the parties (students, institutions) is not living up to its responsibilities.

The long-standing arguments about who is responsible for educational failures demonstrate that there is no shortage of ready culprits, ranging from underprepared and unmotivated students to ineffective pedagogies and instructors to a culture that devalues education. There is also no end in sight to this debate, and no practical solutions are likely to emerge from this line of questioning.

But if we define engagement in the more limited sense—i.e., student involvement in a learning process—we can move past the issue of who is responsible to a more productive question: “What are the factors affecting student engagement in a particular type of learning process?” This could lead to less politically charged, more locally based, efforts to identify and eliminate barriers to student engagement in classrooms and educational programs.

What is the Relationship Between Engagement and Learning?

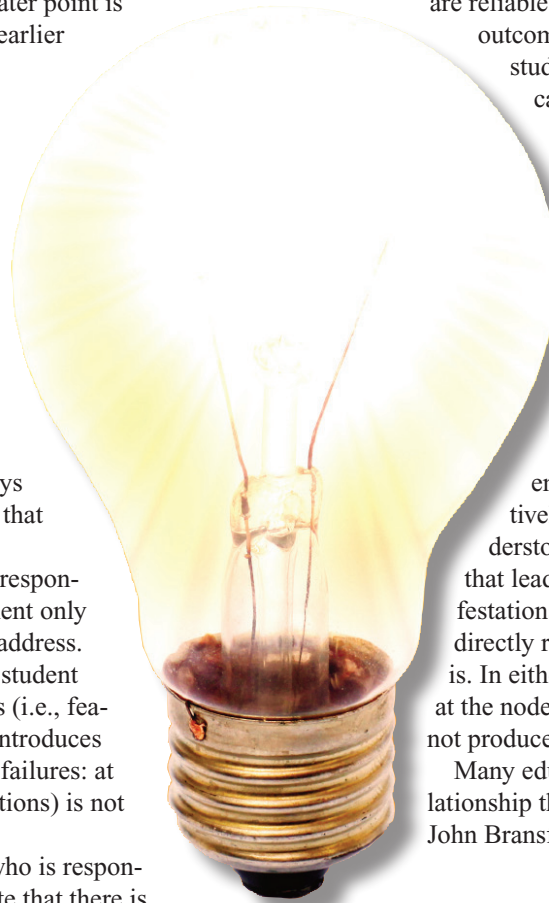
Whether engagement is seen primarily in emotional, cognitive, or behavioral terms or as a metaconcept comprising all three of these dispositions in some complex, as yet unclear

understood relationship, it is often assumed that engagement is causally related to learning. But the relationship between engagement and learning is far from clear. Some highly engaged students learn almost nothing, simply because the classes they take are so poorly designed or incompetently taught that little of consequence happens in them.

As has been widely reported, measures of engagement are reliable correlates of such desirable student outcomes as higher grades among first-year students and college persistence. Yet the causal ordering, if any, among engagement, learning, and student outcomes is unclear.

Engagement may simply be the byproduct of a learning environment that suits the student. If this were true, the observed correlations among the dependent variables of engagement, learning, and other student outcomes (e.g., grades and graduation rates) would result from their sharing a common set of determinants (learning environment design features). Or, alternatively, perhaps the mysterious and little-understood motivational (and cognitive) factors that lead some students to more visible manifestations of engagement are themselves more directly responsible for learning than engagement is. In either of the above scenarios, an intervention at the node we call “engagement” would probably not produce the educational outcomes we desire.

Many educational theorists assume a causal relationship they haven’t really proved between what John Bransford and his colleagues call “cognitive



“Students and institutions each have responsibilities for the quality of learning. Students need to put forth the effort necessary to develop their knowledge and skills, and institutions need to provide the appropriate environments to facilitate student learning.”

competence” (i.e., learning) and motivational factors, perhaps because it is so difficult to control for all the variables in such a way as to produce more persuasive evidence of causality. And there is the even more complex problem of what we mean by “learning.” Bransford et al. usefully distinguish between “learning-oriented” students, who value education for its intrinsic worth, and “performance-oriented” students, who may be more preoccupied with grades. It may be that certain forms of behavioral engagement lead only to achievement-related outcomes, not to the deeper forms of learning we value most.

NEXT STEPS

We do know a great deal about student engagement that matters for learning and that we can build on. We know, or at least have reason to believe, that it is better for a student to be engaged—even behaviorally engaged, as revealed by the NSSE indicators—than not to be. We know, or have reason to suspect, that many of the deeply embedded, rarely interrogated structures of American higher education today may actually contribute to, rather than meliorate, the disengagement problem.

Do we really consider the following a recipe for engagement: 15-week courses meeting for two hours twice a week with one professor, focused on a discrete but arbitrary subject upon which students are examined in a high-stakes final exam? Does our notion—and delivery—of general education follow such a recipe? Our majors?

We know that classroom teachers have enormous power over their students for good or ill—that a powerfully engaging instructor of botany can turn 30 botany-hating students into botany lover/learners (and the opposite is true as well). We know that students disengage when tasks become either too easy or too complex and that some students are engaged in one class but not in others. And we know that some student subgroups seem to benefit from engagement more than others, even if the benefit cannot unequivocally be seen as increased learning.

But there is a great deal that we don’t know—or worse, that we think we know but may be wrong about. We badly need more research on the interaction between engagement and learning [Editor’s note: see the article by Ernest Pascarella et al. in the January/February 2010 issue of *Change* for such a study] and on the precise relationships among the various types of engagement and their relationships to the learning that matters most to us.

We need to know more about why some students, and some subgroups of students, disengage under certain circumstances and what to do to prevent that from happening.

We need to test more of our assumptions and define and use our terms with greater precision. The current definitions of engagement are too abstract, the relationship between engagement and learning too poorly understood, to fully guide us. In short, we need to make educational engagement narrower and clearer, and we need to find more refined and practical ways to evaluate engagement in higher education. ☐

RESOURCES

- Bransford, J., Brown, A., & Cocking, R. (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Fredricks, J.A., Blumenfeld, P.C., & Paris, A.H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74, 59–109.
- Friedlander, M.L., Heatherington, L., Johnson, B., & Skowron, E.A. (1994). Sustaining engagement: A change event in family therapy, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 41, 438–448.
- Gonyea, R., & Kuh, G. (2009). *Using NSSE in institutional research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Harper, S., & Quaye, S. (2009). *Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Leamson, R. (1999). *Thinking about teaching and learning: Developing habits of learning with first-year college and university students*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Pascarella, E., & Terenzini, P. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research* (Vol. 2). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Terenzini, P.T., Rendón, L.I., Upcraft, M.L., Millar, S.B., Allsion, K.W., Gregg, P.L. and Jalomo, R. (1994). The transition to college: Diverse students, diverse stories. *Research in Higher Education*, 35, 57–74.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*, 2nd edition. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wolf-Wendel, L., Ward, K., & Kinzie, J. (2009). A tangled web of terms: The overlap and unique contribution of involvement, engagement, and integration to understanding college student success. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50, 407–428

Copyright of Change is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.