Engaging first year students:
A conceptual organiser for student engagement

Linda Leach and Nick Zepke, School of Educational Studies, Massey University

The first year experience in higher education is known to be important to students' outcomes, such as retention, persistence, completion and achievement (Hillman, 2005; Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005; Kuh et al., 2006). One factor that influences students' first year experience is engagement, "a broad phenomenon which encompasses academic as well as certain non-academic and social aspects of the student experience" (Coates, 2006, p. 4). There is a growing body of literature on student engagement, particularly in the USA (Kuh et al., 2006), increasingly in Australia (Krause & Coates, 2008) and the UK (Yorke, 2006). In this presentation we will describe a conceptual organiser we developed from student engagement literature, how we evaluated it using data from a student engagement project, how it was modified and how it might be used by teachers, programmes and institutions to enhance student engagement.

Our analysis of current engagement literature identified four strands. The first, called motivation and agency, focuses on the agentic, constructivist learner. Studies informing this perspective found that motivation and willingness to act are important explanatory factors in whether learners engage or not. Schuetz (2008) found that Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory was an excellent fit for engagement - agentic individuals with clear goals and positive self-theories interacting with their social environments. We labelled a second strand transactional engagement. This includes all transactions occurring in educationally purposeful activities between teachers and students in institutional settings. Relationships between students and teachers are seen as important facets of engagement; student-student relationships are also important. A third strand, institutional support suggests successful institutions have cultures that focus on student success, fore-ground student learning in their mission, establish high expectations, aim for continuous improvement, invest money in support services, assert the importance of diversity and difference and prepare students for learning in higher education (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005). The first year learning experience is very important as it is the time when the patterns of engagement are set. The fourth strand concerns active citizenship. This is a deeper, socially aware form of engagement that emerges from critiques of the way it is generally constructed – as psychological dispositions and academic achievement leading to learning that lacks social context (McMahon & Portelli, 2004). Democratic-critical engagement is participatory, dialogic and leads not only to academic achievement but success as an active citizen.

From these four strands we developed a conceptual organiser for student engagement. For each strand we identified indicators for what that strand might look like in practice. We then evaluated the conceptual organiser against a set of data gathered in a New Zealand project on student engagement in tertiary education, funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative. Case studies were conducted with first time enrolled students in nine institutions across the tertiary sector. Data were gathered through a student survey, student interviews and teacher survey.

Ethics approval was given by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee. We analysed data from 72 student interviews to identify strands and indicators in the conceptual organiser.

We found that all four strands were present in the data, though some indicators were more clearly supported than others. Students discussed a variety of motivations for engaging in their learning. The indicators in the organiser were all evident: students talked about their desire and ability to work autonomously and their competence to achieve success. Some wanted relationships with others; some preferred to work on their own. The data also provided a lot of evidence of transactional engagement. This had two aspects: interactions with teachers and with other students. There was more evidence for the indicators relating to active and collaborative learning and constructive interaction than for academic challenge and enriching educational experiences. The institutional support strand was also evident in the data. Most students knew about services available to them though fewer actually used them. Most evident was data showing institutions were investing in a variety of support services. Less evident were a focus on student success, high expectations of students, diversity being valued and institutions' commitment to continuous improvement. We found evidence of an emerging strand in the engagement literature – active citizenship, particularly as information on this strand was not explicitly sought. Of the indicators, there was evidence that some students did expect to make knowledge claims, that they engaged with 'other' students and had a firm sense of themselves. It was possible to see some living successfully in the world. For many learning was participatory, dialogic and active, though it seemed to be critical for fewer.

As a result of this evaluation we made two modifications to the conceptual organiser (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A revised conceptual organiser for student engagement

Strands in engagement	Chosen indicators
Motivation and agency (Engaged students are intrinsically motivated and want to exercise their agency)	*Provide opportunity for students to work autonomously* *Provide experiences for students to develop relationships with others* *Foster students' sense of is competence*
Transactional engagement (Students engage with teachers)	*Provide experiences that challenge academically* *Ensure that learning is active and collaborative inside and outside the classroom* *Enable constructive Student teachers interactions* *Provide enriching educational experiences*
Transactional engagement (Students engage with each other)	*Provide active and collaborative learning inside and outside the classroom* *Foster positive, constructive peer relationships.* *Encourage students to use social skills to engage with others*
Institutional support (Institutions provide an environment conducive to learning)	*Maintain a strong focus on student success* *Have high expectations of students* *Invest in a variety of support services* *Value diversity* *Seek continuous improvement*
Active citizenship (Students and institutions work together to enable challenges to social beliefs and practices)	*Teach students to make legitimate knowledge claims* *Encourage students to engage effectively with others including the 'other'* *Foster a firm sense of self* *Teach in ways to make learning participatory, dialogic, active and critical*
Non-institutional support (Students are supported by family and friends to engage in learning)	*Assist family and friends to understand the demands of study* *Recognise the impact on learning of non-institutional influences* *Encourage family and friends to create space for study commitments*

First, the amount of data on transactional engagement suggested that this strand could be separated into two strands: interaction with teachers and interaction between students. Second, the organiser was originally developed with a focus on institutions and what they can do to foster student engagement. But ignoring the non-institutional factors is a potential weakness. Clearly engagement is complex and is also influenced by a variety of non-institutional factors. Some students work very hard to manage their time and their lives in order to study successfully.

We suggest that the organiser offers one way of thinking about the complexities of student engagement, particularly in the crucial first year in higher education. The indicators are action statements for what teachers and institutions can do to enrich students' first year experience. They could be used by individual teachers, programmes and institutions to think about what more they can do to engage students in a variety of ways across the different strands of engagement. They could develop a different set of indicators, more relevant to their own contexts, and use these as a basis for judging success in engaging students.

Acknowledgements

References

Coates, H. (2006). *Student engagement in campus-based and online education*. London: Routledge.

Hillman, K. (2005). *The first year experience: The transition from secondary school to university and TAFE in Australia*. Retrieved on March 3, 2009, from http://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/37491/FYEReport05.pdf

Krause, K-L., Hartley, R., James, R., & McInnis, C. (2005). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies*. Retrieved on March 3, 2009, from http://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/37491/FYEReport05.pdf

Krause, K-L., & Coates, H. (2008). Students' engagement in first-year university. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 33*(5), 493-505.

Kuh, G., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J., Whitt, E., & Associates. (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kuh, G., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J., Bridges, B., & Hayek, J. (2006). What matters to student success: A review of the literature. Retrieved on March 6, 2009, from http://nces.ed.gov/IPEDS/research/pdf/Kuh_Team_Report.pdf

McMahon, B., & Portelli, J. (2004). Engagement for what? Beyond popular discourses of student engagement. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *3*(1), 59-76.

Schuetz, P. (2008). A theory-driven model of community college student engagement. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 32,* 305-324.

Yorke, M. (2006). *Student engagement: Deep, surface or strategic*? Keynote address delivered at the Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus, Australia.