

**Target journal: Teaching in Higher Education**

**Alienation, agency and authenticity: a synthesis of practice and effects in student engagement**

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**Abstract**

In recent years a number of authors have undertaken extensive reviews of the international research literature to investigate student engagement in higher education. This paper presents the findings of a study that undertook a project to synthesise the qualitative research literature systematically, through the use of qualitative research synthesis. The concepts and themes that have recurred across the student engagement literature which are discussed in terms of four themed approaches to student engagement. The challenges and opportunities of using the methodology are presented along with providing a number of recommendations for further research regarding integrated approaches to student engagement.

**Introduction**

Student learning and development are the core business of the academy (Coates, 2010), and reviews of the student engagement literature provide a useful resource when examining factors that influence student engagement (for example, Trowler & Trowler 2010; Zepke & Leach, 2010). As evidence-based planning, practice and quality enhancement further develop, universities are seeking more sophisticated ways of using data about education. It is argued here that drawing on / synthesising qualitative studies can offer a valuable means of examining student engagement due to the more personalised perspectives and illuminative experiences that qualitative studies provide, which are often difficult to locate through analysis of national student survey data, typically reported upon within quantitative studies. This paper undertakes such a project, shifting away from quantitative forms of meta-analysis and quasi-qualitative forms of meta-synthesis to adopt qualitative research synthesis (QRS) as the research framework (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010).

Funded by the Higher Education Academy this paper presents the first QRS undertaken on the theme of student engagement, across higher education. Detail is included on how the synthesis process was conducted, the main findings are discussed and a list of the key challenges and opportunities of using the methodology are provided. Finally, recommendations for both practice and research are offered.

## **Literature Review**

It is evident that student engagement has been the focus of a substantial amount of research over the last few years, particularly in the USA (Kuh 2001; Fredericks et al. 2004), the UK (Mann 2001) and Australia (Krause et al. 2005; UWA 2005; Coates, 2010) with much of our understanding about student engagement reflected in what is understood from analysis of national survey data.

In the Trowlers' (2010) review definitions of student engagement draw upon Kuh et al. (2007) and Krause and Coates (2008) by considering student engagement in terms of the extent to which students are seen to engage in activities that contribute towards desired (high-quality) learning outcomes. The definitions promote a predominantly institutional focus centred on outcomes (such as retention, success rates and acknowledging diversity). Zepke & Leach (2010) similarly focus on 'high quality learning' (ACER, 2008: vi) but broaden their accepted definition to include a focus on the student's cognitive investment, active participation and emotional commitment to their learning (Chapman, 2003). However, whilst acknowledging a more student-centred approach, Zepke & Leach did not embrace factors outside the institution, including students' willingness and ability to engage, and the influence of wider social networks. Nonetheless, what both reviews highlight, which has resonance with this study in that responsibility for engagement is shared; some students experience engagement negatively; and engagement requires successful transition.

The reviews of the student engagement literature conducted by the Trowler and Trowler and Zepke & Leach, offer a broad phenomenon that encompasses academic as well as selected non-academic and social aspects of the student experiences. Studies included in the reviews highlight themes relating to how students engage with their studies and what they, institutions and educators can do to improve engagement (and retention) including the roles of

institutional structures and cultures (Porter, 2006; Kuh 2009); a focus on learning design and how educators practise and relate to their students (Haug, 2006; Mearns et al. 2007; Bryson & Hand, 2007; Bailey & Garner, 2010); student agency and motivation (Schuetz, 2008; Hockings et al. 2008); and the impact of environmental factors such as family, relationships and economic status (Miliszewska and Horwood, 2004; Law, 2005; Case, 2007). Furthermore, issues of student retention are viewed as a concern for all institutions (Krause, 2005; Tinto, 2006; Kuh et al, 2008) set against a backdrop of widening participation (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007).

Whilst the Trowler and Trowler's review largely excluded qualitative studies, as they did not meet the authors' criteria for robustness, one of their key recommendations highlighted the need to develop a robust body of evidence, built up through small-scale studies that speak to – 'confirm, challenge or redefine' other studies, so that rather than stand alone evidence, a more integrated picture can emerge of practice and effects (p.50). With this in mind we sought to undertake a qualitative research synthesis of the research evidence.

We believed that it was important at the outset to define student engagement, with a focus on the student voice; therefore the following definition was selected;

'[E]ngagement which can be considered to represent a connection in the context of a relationship which a student desires or expects to belong to'

(Case 2007:120).

Having established this it was then possible to create a clear research question and set of inclusion and exclusion criteria necessary for undertaking the synthesis, which we now go on to present.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research synthesis (QRS), a methodologically grounded, rigorous and scholarly approach, developed by Major & Savin-Baden, (2010) was used in this study to examine the practice and effects of student engagement. This involved analysing, synthesizing and interpreting the results of a set of qualitative studies addressing the research theme. The QRS

process offers a useful means of maximising knowledge production, relevance and scientific knowledge for dissemination (Major and Savin-Baden, 2010). Furthermore, QRS provides researcher knowledge about quality issues when conducting qualitative research methodology, since only studies of accepted calibre and standing are included.

The purpose of the qualitative research synthesis (QRS) is to make sense of concepts, categories or themes that have recurred across the student engagement literature, in particular the practice and effects of student engagement, in order to develop a comprehensive picture of the findings (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007; Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). Qualitative synthesis is more than a literature review, rather it; compares and analyses texts, creating new interpretations in the process and can be considered a complete study in itself (Noblit and Hare, 1988:9).

The QRS provided opportunity to:

- Make connections between existing studies
- Complement primary empirical studies
- Complement existing meta-analysis/syntheses by providing a different perspective
- Provide ways to advance theory
- Help to identify gaps and omissions in a given body of research
- Enable dialogue and debate
- Provide a cost-efficient approach to qualitative research

### *The qualitative research synthesis process*

The role of the synthesis is to be as transparent as possible about the process. As researchers we were aware of our own guiding philosophical stances which value inclusivity, empowerment, enablement and reciprocal forms of expertise, all of which had bearing upon the synthesis process. Furthermore, throughout this study, we have adopted an interpretivist stance, which alongside the recognition of researcher stance, also includes the use of thick description (Geertz, 1973) and the interpretation of subtext.

The QRS process followed the stages as detailed by Major and Savin-Baden (2010);

- 1 {
  - Identify area of research and research question
  - Identify and collate qualitative studies related to the research question across a large area of literature
  - Examine the theories and methods used in each study in-depth
- 2 {
  - Compare and analyze findings for each study
  - Synthesize the findings for each study
  - Undertake an interpretation of findings across the studies
  - Provide recommendations

### *Research Question*

Our research question was:

What concepts, categories or themes have recurred across the student engagement literature, in particular regarding the practice and effects of student engagement?

We designed and defined the parameters of the search to establish the set of papers for the synthesis based on the initial aims of the study, which were:

- Which approaches to student engagement are described in the literature?
- Are the approaches which appear similar, through the description, actually similar?
- Which approaches are the best for engaging students?
- Why are some approaches more readily used than others?
- What questions remain?

### *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

Our primary guide for inclusion was topic area. We wanted to review and analyze studies that showed how students were seen to engage with their studies in the broadest sense taking into account what activities students and staff discussed that were viewed as contributing towards students' engagement with their learning.

The search used 7 data bases;

- ERIC
- Academic Search Complete
- ASSIA
- Open University (HEER)
- Routledge
- SAGE Journals
- SCOPUS

A broad sweep of the data bases on ‘student engagement’ and ‘higher education’ and ‘qualitative’ research, published since 2000, was adopted first. This resulted in 2,530 articles. However, we further narrowed articles found through using inclusion and exclusion criteria we deemed critical to our work as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria:**

Criteria	Include	Exclude
1. Date	Studies conducted between 2000-2011	Sources and publications before 2000
2. Topic	Sources related to student engagement approaches, in particular the use of terms used to describe these Sources detailing what the approaches are considering the terms used Ways in which the approaches are used Effectiveness of approaches e.g. perceived benefits Adoption of approaches e.g. use / uptake of certain approaches over others	Sources and publications not related
3. Location	International literature	Sources not in English language
4. Context	HE	FE, School sector
5. Publication	Primary empirical qualitative studies (To include case study research, narrative inquiry, ethnography, phenomenology, (participatory) action research, grounded theory)  Peer reviewed journal articles  Thick description	Quantitative studies, literature reviews, other syntheses.  Grey literature, reports, conference proceedings  Lacking thick description

The 56 papers which remained were then appraised in terms of study quality using criteria for evaluating studies suitable for qualitative research synthesis as outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2. Criteria for evaluating studies suitable for qualitative research synthesis  
(Adapted from Major & Savin-Baden, 2010: xx)**

	0 No mention	1 Some mention	2 Good mention	3 Extensive mention
Researcher(s) situated in relation to participants				
Mistakes voiced				
Researcher(s) situated in relation to the data				
Researcher(s) take a critical stance toward research				
Participant involvement in data interpretation				
Study theoretically situated				
Different versions of participants identities acknowledged				

Selecting articles rated 2 or 3 in at least five of our seven categories allowed us to develop a pool of articles that we could reanalyze and reinterpret. However, this approach limited the number of articles which were selected as the final set. Thus nine papers remained (see Table 3) because many studies were not methodologically positioned, the description provided of the methodology and methods used were thin, and in many cases absent and the articles lacked thick description.

**Table 3. The papers included in the synthesis**

Year	Author	Journal	Title
(2000),15 (2), 187 – 198.	Bailey, R. & Garner, M	<i>Teaching in Higher Education</i>	Is the feedback in HE assessment worth the paper it is written on: Teacher's reflections on their practices
(2007), 44 (4), 349 – 362	Bryson, C. & Hand, L.	<i>Innovations in Education &amp; Teaching International</i>	The role of engagement in inspiring teaching and learning ,
(2007), 12 (1), 119 – 133.	Case, J.	<i>Teaching in Higher Education</i>	Alienation & engagement: exploring students' experiences of studying engineering
(2010). 15(4), 423 – 433.	Case, J., Marshall, D. & Linder, C.	<i>Teaching in Higher Education,</i>	Being a student again: a narrative study of a teacher's experience,
(2000), 25 (3), 279 – 291.	Cooper, N.	<i>Assessment &amp; Evaluation in Higher Education,</i>	Facilitating Learning from Formative Feedback in Level 3 Assessment,
(2002), 7 (3), 323 – 336.	Haggis, T. & Pouget, M.	<i>Teaching in Higher Education,</i>	Trying to be Motivated: perspectives on learning from younger students accessing higher education
(2008). 14 (3), 209 – 223	Houston, D., Robertson, T. & Prebble, T.	<i>Quality in Higher Education,</i>	Exploring Quality in a University Department: Perspectives and Meanings,
(2011), 32 (1), 1 – 4.	Kettle, M.	<i>Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education</i>	Academic practice as explanatory framework: reconceptualising international student academic engagement and university teaching
(2006), 54 (4), 355 – 385.	Paulus, T., Horvitz, B. & Shi, M.	<i>Educational Technology Research and Development</i>	Isn't It Just Like Our Situation? Engagement and Learning in an Online Story-Based Environment

### *Analysis, synthesis and interpretation*

The second part of the QRS process is the analysis, synthesis and interpretation of the data. Each paper was read and re-read several times and a summary was created to enable the studies to be compared. The purpose of analysis was to move beyond comparison, as such the analysis of relationships between the studies was important to identify. The methods used were reciprocal translation analysis, where studies were translated into one another where possible, and refutational analysis, which meant looking for themes which did not compare, where perspectives might compete (Noblit and Hare, 1988). From this process the first level or overarching themes emerged as in

Table 4, in which all the themes are presented.

**Table 4. Presentation of themes**

Overarching concepts / themes	Second order interpretations	Third order interpretations
Intra-personal engagement	Emotional engagement Alienation (isolation) and injustice Motivation Transition, identity shifts , worldview Development of capacity Self-sufficiency Cynicism	<u>Emotional engagement</u> - Resilience and resistance  <u>Engagement as connection and disjunction</u> - Relevance - Alienation and injustice  <u>Engagement as autonomy</u> - Agency and self- sufficiency - Disillusionment  <u>Inter-relational engagement</u>
The influence of one another	Awareness of, and effects of one another Treasured relationships Support Discomfort Embarrassment	- Valued actions and interactions (tutor, students, wider social / cultural and political networks) - Performance (falsehood and veracity)
Tutor style and approach	Valued actions and interactions Trust relations, equity and justice (Tutor to student, student to student, tutor to institution) Credible, relevant, memorable <i>active academic</i> teaching practices (theoretical sense -making)	
Approaches influenced by social cultural structures and practices	Seamless connection to disconnection with family, friends, interests, career	
Approaches influenced by socio-political structures and practices	Institutional structures Approaches to quality Approaches to power	

Mind maps were also used to locate Level 1 themes across the studies and involved;

- Combining themes across studies
- Expanding or redefining themes
- Re-reading data
- Developing a matrix of studies to locate cross-study themes
- Developing second order themes

The final stage of the synthesis required the development of third order interpretations; translating information to a higher level, whilst still maintaining data integrity.

### *Issues of plausibility*

Efforts were taken to ensure the studies included had located a methodological base for the design and approaches adopted, including how data were managed and interpreted. Engaging in reflexivity, peer evaluation, maintaining data integrity and being explicit about researcher influence were also examined to ensure the included studies were plausible (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010).

## **Findings**

The findings that emerged from the synthesis of the 9 papers included 4 overarching themes which are first summarised below and then presented in detail.

- *Inter-relational engagement* - whereby student engagement was characterised and experienced through connection to a wide set of relationships including student to tutor, student to student, student to family, and student to career
- *Engagement as autonomy* – this related to how students shifted from unfamiliarity and self-consciousness to self-sufficiency in learning.
- *Emotional engagement* - this was illustrated by intra-personal capacity, in terms of student resilience and persistence.
- *Engagement as connection and disjunction* - there was a variety of student experience from those who had a more troublesome, questioning approach to those with a strong sense of disjunction

### *Inter-relational engagement*

Student engagement was characterised as the value of connecting to a wide set of relationships including student to tutor, student to student, student to family, and student to career. Student influences upon one another – interactions, classroom learning through responses and behaviours of one another where particularly important, for example the notions of reification, whereby students shared interpretations of an experience in negotiation. This served to highlight a range of experience from connection through to

disconnection between study, student life, family and home-life and the impact of learning contexts on engagement (Case, 2007). For example, in terms of connection

...with the students in our seminar group we all trust each other, we are all really good friends, I don't know how it's worked out that way but we all get on so well, and with our tutors we think they're so nice, I can trust each and every one of them. (Bryson & Hand, 2007:357)

Whilst this student acknowledged the support experienced amongst peers and tutors, it is also evident that this was necessarily something they had not expected would occur.

Whereas in the next quotation we see this student's disconnection with....:

I was in a [scenario discussion] group that contained two members of a team I'm currently in for [another course]. This team has never meshed well . . . it has been a terrible team experience . . . Having those two people in my scenarios group made it difficult to respond sometimes. . . . In retrospect, I think the context of the scenario might have been a good way for us to work on some of the issues that we had. But at the time, the real team problems were too immediate. It just didn't work out to be a positive way for us to talk about our own team dynamics. (Paulus et al, 2006:378)

What is notable here is that the scenario was intended to engage students in considering their own ways of working as a team, yet the team dynamics amongst the students made learning in this way unmanageable.

Such findings link with Mann's (2005) work on relationships in the context of the socio-cultural nature of education and experience of education for the student. Students expressed varying degrees of troublesomeness in being amongst others within learning situations, for example from anxiety at being asked to contribute, to enjoying class discourse (Kettle, 2011), to feeling judged (Cooper, 2000). Nevertheless, for some students, behaviours exhibited in the classroom would be context-bound, with students acknowledging their actions would revert back to preferred ways of behaving once their study was complete (Kettle, 2011). This sense of performance, of having to act in order to achieve, appeared to reflect a range of approaches from both students and tutors, from falsehood, to veracity.

In terms of relationships with tutors, what was also notable was that students were aware of tutor tensions between teaching and research (i.e. their approach to their work (ref), their pressure to publish (ref), that students are experienced as an inconvenience (ref), how teaching is passed on to graduate students and ultimately how this impacts on relationships students have with their tutors and the wider university), as one student explained:

(University lecturers) are just too distant, and they give very little time to their students as well. It's a bit ... bleak. There's not much contact there, at all ... They don't show much emotion to their students. It's quite a scary scenario. One little ant, in a hall ... They should learn communication skills. (Haggis & Pouget, 2002:330)

### Further

I went and asked him some stuff and he was really rude ... if I'd been in a lesson ... I would have walked out, because he really embarrassed me. Even though I was stood there on my own, he was awful to me. (Bryson & Hand, 2007:359)

The suggestion that tutors need to reflect upon and improve their communication skills is highlighted in both the above comments. Further, there is a lack of regard on the tutors part in terms of building / forging a valued / respectful relationship. In both examples the tutors behaviour can be seen as conscious or unconscious means of exerting control and in turn is seen to influence the students decisions around their sense of agency and willingness to 'engage' in the learning encounter, which the following theme now moves on to consider.

### *Engagement as autonomy*

The studies highlighted identity shifts, and stages of transition from 'new comer' to students filtering information and (strategically) regulating their actions in light of the conditions and power structures within which they viewed themselves as operating. For example,

My reflective journal helped me realise why I didn't want to study. When I identified what was present when I didn't want to study I tried to gradually eliminate them ... Once I identified the elements that were present when I did want to study I tried to include these all of the time ... The

main element was interest ... to try and include this I tried to relate the subjects to me personally. (Haggis & Pouget, 2002:328).

In practice it was clear that approaches to engagement here reflected transitional agency, of not making connections between new content and worldview (Cooper, 2000) to developing awareness and insight for self and career (Case, 2007), albeit with limited application (Paulus et al., 2006). For example, students' commitment to improvement emerged, including motivation to improve on using formative feedback (Cooper, 2000), in learning academic discourse (Kettle, 2011) and improving disciplinary knowledge (Paulus et al., 2006). In other examples students' resourcefulness to students' resistance to share work was of note (Cooper, 2000), including a fear of revealing too much of the self (Paulus et al., 2006).

Yet engagement as autonomy also reflected student agency in terms of the need to dis-engage, to take time out (Case, 2007). Agency was also expressed as recognising power imbalance (Houston et al., 2008) and the need to develop strategies to manage the timetable, for example;

Today we had the last lecture and the last tut [tutorial] and I am so exhausted I can hardly write. It's been a long time to sustain the commitment of early morning lectures and afternoon tuts and ran out of steam long ago to keep up properly with what is happening in the course. I think like most students I'm planning a couple of days to find out what is happening before the exam. (Case et al, 2010:427)

However, there was also evidence of autonomy as disillusionment;

- of students feeling churned out through the system, none the wiser (Houston et al., 2008)
- of students expressing a diminished interest for their subject and career (due to intense engagement and work overload) (Case, 2007)
- of a student gaining good grades yet being left with a sense of 'bluffing her way through the course' (Case et al., 2010:427)

Disillusionment was also experienced due to students concern regarding tutors' responses towards their learning and growth (Bryson & Hand, 2007). Students were seen to hold expectations of what was acceptable to them in terms of their tutors behaviour, thus when a lack of respect or attention was demonstrated, students willingness to invest their time and

effort was reciprocated. In another example, students experienced disillusionment regarding the paradox of being encouraged by their tutor to develop critical thought, yet within a limited western view and within strict academic practices (Kettle, 2011).

### *Emotional engagement*

Across the studies emotional engagement was illustrated by intra-personal capacity, in terms of student resilience and persistence. Students remained engaged to their studies, surmounting the challenge, (bounded by time). Data illustrated that students engaged emotionally in committing to and encountering their studies. Of significance were students who persisted despite the 'joyless slog' (Bryson & Hand, 2007:356), and the drudgery (Case, 2007). What became apparent was the students' resilience. Students were seen to challenge themselves to learn (Case et al., 2010), to expend effort (Haggis & Pouget, 2002), and this resonates with the wider literature (e.g. Coates, 2005) as being necessary conditions required from students.

Although the studies included narratives from known populations of students who might feel overwhelmed and isolated e.g. international students (Kettle, 2011) and access students (Haggis & Pouget, 2002), evidence of student resilience and persistence was noted across the studies by *all* types of students. It was evident that learning was a personal and psychological matter. For example,

Realising that I didn't know something and feeling embarrassed about it was an enduring experience of this course, only occasionally relieved when I could complete a tutorial or when I passed the test (but quickly dispelled again on resumption of new lecture material). I was strongly aware of an ongoing level of anxiety that I experienced, both with regard to 'getting stuck' in problems that we had to complete, and in fears about failing in the assessment. Sometimes it seemed that this anxiety was almost paralysing. (Case et al. 2010: 426).

Further

I get clammy palms and my heart beats really fast because I'm putting myself out on the line and putting up new ideas that are new to me and just totally vulnerable to criticism and to attacks (Kettle, 2010:9)

What appeared to be significant was the pedagogical relationship between the student's sense of her/himself and their learning, and the experience being bounded by time. Authors such as Ziskin et al., (2006) have considered persistence in terms of student retention and links to institutional practices, including social integration and academic integration as playing a role on students' *intent* to persist. However, they along with authors, such as Barnett (2007), highlight there is much we do not know about student persistence. What is of note across the studies examined here was the students own personal endeavour.

Whilst this theme includes those students who reported a (continued) interest and enthusiasm for their subject, for example;

It's not where you go it's what you get out of it ... I'd still do it even if I end up picking litter (Bryson & Hand, 2007:355)

I just like learning about it because I am really passionate about what I want to do. I want to know as much as I can. (Bryson & Hand, 2007:355)

Of more significance, emotional engagement related to those students across the studies for whom engagement was a continued struggle, a quest to surmount the challenge (ref)

'The thing is, learning chem eng is not fun, it really isn't like, it's tons and tons of maths, and all you have to do is work, and it takes over your whole life'

(Case, year, page xx)

Further

The only sense of fulfillment related to getting it done, to completing the task (Case, 2007 et al.:123)

The persistence and resilience was marked by a variety of responses. For example, student approaches to engagement included denial of personal pleasures and serious relationships, those who maintained extracurricular activities harboured guilt. Of particular note were those who worked through awkwardness, challenge, discomfort, exhaustion, dis-engagement (depression), embarrassment and personal loss, to get their degree. A number of students reflected their resilience was 'boundaried', in that their efforts would have an end point.

Trowler and Trowler (2010:5) present dimensions of engagement, drawing on Bloom (1956) and Fredricks, Blumfeld and Paris (2004: 62 – 63) identifying these as;

- Behavioural engagement
- Emotional engagement and
- Cognitive engagement

Whilst based on engagement issues with students at school level, each of these dimensions is proposed as representing a form of engagement, separated by a gulf of non-engagement (withdrawal or apathy). Emotional engagement is considered in terms of students' interest, enjoyment and sense of belonging. Further, emotional engagement is viewed along a continuum of behaviours reflecting attitude and compliance with expectations and norms to behaviour that challenges, confronts or rejects and can be obstructive and delaying. Positive and negative behaviours run along one or more of these three dimensions.

In our findings, emotional engagement is further unpacked to reveal deeper issues of resistance, resilience and emotional engagement as a 'bounded event' (time). What is of interest is how students could simultaneously shift along the dimensions of emotion, behaviour and cognition – most striking in our study was students' persistence, this ability to engage despite dealing with alienation, lack of relevance, and the drudgery of study.

### *Engagement as connection and disjunction*

In this final theme, students study approaches reflected an ease of connection, which served to spur them on (Cooper, 2000). Whilst for others, disjunction was more prevalent, and experienced as a dis-connection between their own world view and new material (Kettle, 2011). The very nature of disjunction means that managing it presented a challenge to the individual, which in turn may result in disjunction being seen as something negative, undesirable and as a barrier rather than a gateway to learning (Savin-Baden, 2000). Yet disjunction did not only occur in relation to engagement that was seen by students to be relevant and meaningful; disjunction also occurred because students experienced challenges to their learning, their life-world and their current meaning systems.

In the context of disjunction, students expressed a sense of alienation, of feeling isolated within or from a group or activity to which they felt they should belong (Haggis & Pouget, 2002). Injustice was also reflected by an externalised cynicism and sense of unfairness (Houston et al., 2008). For example, one student expressed their disjunction as follows:

When I started I felt all over the place. I wasn't organised at all. I kept trying to get organised but then I fell behind the others ... I remember thinking to myself, I'm just going to get a job (laugh). I just want away, I want to get out of here ... Maybe I had got myself into something that I wasn't ready for. (Haggis & Pouget, 2002:330).

A wider literature has examined educational experiences for students, for example Hockings et al., (2008) suggests students who reflect, and make connections between ideas of their own and from others, are most deeply engaged. It was evident that connecting with peers and mentors and expectations of academic study supported engagement and tended to reduce disjunction. What was particularly poignant was that often disjunction was seen as alienation and injustice within the system of higher education. There was a variety of student experience that ranged from making connections, to those who had a more troublesome, questioning approach and sense of disjunction, experienced as a lack of relationship or separation between thought and action. For example;

- Students engaged with an acknowledged sense of being different to, not as capable as their contemporaries (Haggis & Pouget, 2002); for others there was an imperceptible link between new content and world-view (Kettle), of feeling naïve, and unprepared (Paulus et al., 2006).
- Irrelevance – students were unable to understand the relevance and meaning regarding set tasks (Cooper, 2000), for some there developed a diminished interest for their subject area, as one student explained:

Enjoy . . . I forgot how to spell that word [laughs]. I don't exactly, I'm not exactly ecstatic. . . . I'm looking forward to graduating as a chem eng and working as a chem. eng, but whether I'm jumping up the mountains as I was doing say maybe in first year about doing chemical engineering, no. If you compare my attitude towards chemical engineering in first year or maybe when I was in matric to now, well it's changed, it's changed I promise you. (Case, 2007:124)

- Disjunction was also experienced in terms of injustice, as:

- Not being accepted by other students; and feeling like an ‘outsider’, for example;

I felt as if I wasn’t going to get anywhere with it ... on the access course you felt able to approach one of your tutors, and say, look, I’m really having difficulty with this ... and I don’t know how to do it, and I feel like a numpty, can you help me. But, I felt as if I couldn’t speak to anybody about it ... I was just one of a majority, just sitting there ... everybody sitting there, doing the same thing, listening, and trying to pay attention, and I thought, what am I sitting here for? What am I getting out of it? (Haggis & Pouget, 2002: 330)

- Disjunction also related to student concerns over tutor bias, lack of care and attention including tutors attitudes, and being made to feel like an inconvenience. For example,

...it’s definitely the lecturer that can really make it interesting or can almost destroy a subject. (Bryson & Hand, 2007:357)

Lecturers rarely add any value to the knowledge available in the textbook ... . Then we are sucked out the other end, exhausted, disillusioned and sometimes none the wiser. (Houston et al, 2008:220)

Barnett (2007) has argued that being a student is to be in a state of anxiety, not only over assessment, and feedback, and workload pressures, but also self-doubts about personal ability, of being able to contribute, of being able to grapple with uncertainty. It has come to light here that HE imposes a severe set of demands upon students, there is no hiding place, and disjunction is a reality for many, for which resilience is required by the student to endure and succeed. Yet, the evidence here also indicated that this alienation and justice went beyond operational matters, which illustrated in many cases that students were aware of their ability and potential to negotiate or surmount the challenges or situations they found themselves contending with.

Having presented the four key themes and their interpretation, we now move on to discussing some of the wider implications of these findings as a whole.

### Discussion: Alienation, agency and authenticity

The findings of this synthesis suggest that there are particular issues related to students engagement in the literature which to date have largely been disregarded by those teaching and making policy in higher education. With changes in policy, practice and funding structures it would seem that there are areas which could be improved to enhance student engagement and improve learning. Yet it could also be argued that in the wider debate about what counts as student engagement and who decides, and whether indeed it is merely a political pawn in the context of an increasingly false higher education rhetoric of openness, access and inclusivity it perhaps helpful to draw on the work on Bernstein. Bernstein (1996) suggested that power and control are embedded empirically within one another but that they are different. Power relations are seen as creating and legitimising boundaries between categories and thus always operate to produce dislocations, whereas control establishes legitimate forms of communication appropriate to the different categories. Thus it would seem that induction into the discipline is a power mechanism whereas the idealised notion of student engagement would seem to be a mechanism that challenges forms of control in order that communication might be established both across disciplines and also between the theorising of the discipline and the realities of practice. Edwards (1997) has suggested that the exercise of power (as opposed to the notion of power relations Bernstein defined) can be seen as disciplinary and pastoral, which is a useful distinction in the context of the literature on student engagement. Disciplinary power is the process by which the State gains knowledge and understanding about the population in order to govern its people. Expert discourses about issues such as crime, health and education are provided and therefore disciplinary knowledge becomes associated with particular practices and the induction into a particular kind of disciplinary identity. Pastoral power is exercised through the idea of confession that enables students to adjust their identity and desires to disciplinary regimes. In this study there was a sense of alienation that students experienced in relation to staff responses toward them along with a sense of injustice, about being an inconvenience.

Although in this QRS the studies highlighted include issues of autonomy, identity shifts, and transitional agency exemplified through students narratives, the notion of autonomy is not

unproblematic in both the student engagement literature and higher education in general. For example, Boughey (2006) questions the extent to which engagement is an autonomous skill, since the rules of engagement are formulated by academic expectations and traditions which students need to learn in order to participate in academic dialogues, processes and practices. Thus the way in which staff present a text to students locates their position in terms of the values and purpose they accord to it. However, Barnett's perspective on supercomplexity and the suggestions of the development of curricula that equip students for an unknowable world is a useful pointer (Barnett, 2000). Perhaps it is possible to improve and change student engagement not only through the way learning is seen and structured, but also through the way in which modes of knowledge are located in the curriculum. By seeing curricula anew as learning spaces it may be possible to offer curricula that shift beyond performativity. Thus it may be possible to see curricula as striated, borderland, smooth or troublesome, as Savin-Baden (2007) has suggested. Inevitably, the distinction and the boundaries between these models collide and overlap, but perhaps they might offer different ways of seeing and structuring curricula, and help us to move away from outcome-based models.

The findings from the literature on student engagement would therefore seem to imply that:

1. Students hold expectations about their interactions with academics when entering higher education. An academics style and approach can thus adversely affect student engagement. Tutors need to be clear about their role and level of interaction with students at the outset to manage a range of expectations.
2. The socio-cultural nature of education and experience of education requires students to negotiate competing demands across a diverse set of relationships when studying in HE, including those with peers and wider circles of family and friends outside of the academy. The impact of learning contexts on engagement reflects a range of approaches used by students (and tutors) ranging from falsehood, to veracity.
3. Students expect to encounter academic structures and traditions through their higher education experience, but exert their own means of control and agency as part of this to maintain and develop a sense of self. Agency is expressed along a continuum of behaviours reflecting attitude and compliance with expectations and norms to behaviour that challenges, confronts or rejects and can be obstructive and delaying.

4. Engaging in academic study requires students to experience disciplinary knowledge in new, interesting and troublesome ways. Students may achieve institutional learning outcomes despite experiencing disjunction. More needs to be understood about intrapersonal capacity and the ways in which students persist in meeting their *own* learning goals.

It would seem then that further understanding is required about the personal and psychological responses towards engagement and students will to learn in HE. It is also evident that the role others may hold (academics, peers, family, friends . . .) in the nurturing and managing of resistance is an important consideration when understanding the nature of students engagement in higher education. Further examination is needed to consider the role others may hold (Academics, peers, family, friends etc.) in the nurturing of resistance.

## **Conclusion**

Many HE institutions are working to enhance and improve their student engagement process. Within this study engagement as resilience has emerged as a powerful theme. We argue student persistence and resilience warrants further investigation in terms of how it resonates with current HE provision centred on institutional-focused outcomes, and how it connects with learning across the disciplines, or its links with student mobility. Student engagement as persistence and resilience is arguably a taken for granted factor of learning in HE, but we argue here, one which deserves greater attention.

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