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Dimensions of engagement in teacher education: From theory to practice

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Abstract

There is a growing body of research highlighting the importance of engagement for students' success in their tertiary studies. Innovations in both theoretical and practical understandings of student engagement are beginning to emerge, informing discussions across diverse contexts including research centres (such as ACER), conferences, and organisations (such as Engagement Australia). In this context, it is relevant to draw together diverse perspectives and arguments regarding what engagement is and could be, and to consider how a unified framework to understand and plan for engagement can impact practice in teacher education.

This paper begins with an exploration of an Engagement Framework developed for use in the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania. This Framework offers a new way of framing engagement in teacher education, drawing attention to the connections between the intellectual environment of the university and the context of the profession. The Framework presents five dimensions of engagement (personal, academic, social, intellectual, and professional) that are distinct and yet interrelated.

The second section of this paper focuses specifically on the academic engagement dimension of the Framework, and explores the ways in which this Framework has led to innovations in teacher education practice both within the curriculum (within specific units of study) and outside of the curriculum (such as Student Engagement Days). These innovations provide examples of the effectiveness of the Engagement Framework as a way of bridging theory and practice, operating as a unifying device within and beyond the curriculum.

Introduction

There is a growing body of research highlighting the importance of engagement for students' success in their studies, their sense of connection with the institution at which they study, and for enhancing their overall 'student experience'. This literature often highlights the role of the institution in improving engagement (e.g. Coates, 2006; Kuh, 2009) and calls attention to engagement as a social and an individual process (Krause, 2005). Engagement is a complex concept, and understandings and definitions have arisen from the range of perspectives through which engagement is viewed: behavioural, psychological, socio-cultural, and holistic (Kahu, 2011). The literature from Australia predominantly presents the behavioural perspective (e.g. ACER, 2011; Krause, 2005), and with organisations (such as Engagement Australia) and the widespread use of tools such as the AUSSE (Coates, 2006) devoted to understanding how student engagement can be tracked and measured, what is sometimes difficult to determine is how these understandings of engagement are enacted in practice. In other words, the focus on tracking and measuring engagement from a behavioural perspective means that the question of *how* students engage has not been widely considered.

In this paper, we present a framework for understanding engagement at a theoretical level which has clear implications for practice. The framework discussed here has been developed by drawing on the literature to create a set of principles that underpin an optimum environment and identifies five dimensions of engagement. This paper thus provides a theoretical position which we offer in the interests of understanding *how* students engage, and also offers several examples of the ways in

which this framework can and has been used to promote innovation in teacher education practice, both within and beyond the curriculum.

The Engagement Framework

The Engagement Framework, developed by Pittaway in 2011 as part of her role as Director of Student Engagement in the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania, draws on both theoretical and practical understandings of engagement. The Engagement Framework was designed to be used as a tool for both students and staff, and for the purpose of framing ongoing curriculum development, Faculty-wide student support initiatives, and the development of pedagogical practice, particularly in relation to online teaching and learning through reference to the engagement literature, current practice, and ongoing research. The Engagement Framework (Pittaway, 2012) allows a way forward in understanding the behavioural, intellectual and social aspects of engagement, moving beyond a focus on only the behavioural perspective with its interest in measurement. It offers a practical means of considering what students can do to better understand their own engagement –with the institution, the content of specific subjects, peers, and skills and capabilities – as well as ways that staff might support and enhance engagement.

The Engagement Framework has five non-hierarchical dimensions (personal, academic, intellectual, social, and professional) which intersect with each other, but which can also be understood individually. The intersecting nature of the dimensions of the Framework and the non-hierarchical structure mean that one dimension (such as social) might be particularly significant for students at a specific point in time, while at other times, professional or academic engagement may play a more significant role. This is consistent with the notion that engagement "plays out in different ways at different points of the educational cycle" (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2011, p. 1).

The Framework can be used by unit coordinators when designing and developing a unit, by tutors when considering the pedagogical practices they might employ to engage students in on-campus and/or online tutorials, by students in taking responsibility for their own learning and making decisions about what, when and how they will engage in their studies and the profession they are entering, and by professional staff in the design of materials to support marketing, recruitment, orientation, induction, transition and student support initiatives.

Four key principles underpin the Engagement Framework, and establish an optimum environment for engagement. These principles are drawn from literature encompassing the scholarship of teaching and learning, student engagement, and university teaching policy (see for example, ACER, 2011; Allen & Clarke, 2007; Allodi, 2010; Dunn & Rakes, 2011; Krause, 2005; Middlecamp, 2005; University of Melbourne, 2007).

1. Staff engagement is a prerequisite for student engagement.
2. Respectful and supportive relationships are essential for learning and teaching.
3. Students must be given, and actively take, responsibility for their own learning.
4. Scaffolding, communicating expectations, and setting high standards lead to the continued development of knowledge, understanding, skills, and capabilities.

Personal engagement is the necessary first dimension of the Engagement Framework and is primarily about awareness of the responsibilities associated with the choice to enrol at university (including an awareness of personal intention to study, level of skill required, expectations of self-as-learner, and assumptions about teaching and learning). For more on this dimension see Pittaway (2012).

Academic engagement requires students to draw upon knowledge, skills and capabilities that go beyond disciplinary boundaries (Lea & Street, 2006) in order to enter into a professional discourse. This dimension of the Framework is explored in more detail in this paper.

Intellectual engagement focuses on students' engagement with the ideas and concepts of the disciplines they are studying, and the ways of thinking endemic to that discipline. Through engaging intellectually, students are more likely to develop confidence when their ideas are challenged, be prepared to ask questions, recognise the strengths and weaknesses of their own thinking, and be open-minded to the views of others.

Social engagement is primarily about relationships, with staff and peers, enabling students to explore other ways of seeing the world, thus deepening and extending their own views, beliefs, and perspectives (Beachboard, Beachboard, Li & Adkison, 2011; Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2006). Krause (2005) argues that the social aspects of engagement are "equally as important as intellectual pursuits" (p. 9).

Professional engagement relates to the nexus between theory and practice, allowing for theoretical constructs to be tested in professional contexts such as professional experience placements. Through engaging professionally in a regular and sustained manner while studying, pre-service teachers have the opportunity to apply, consolidate, and challenge their knowledge, beliefs, and skills as learners and as developing professionals (Bowen, 2005).

As is evidenced in these brief definitions, the five dimensions of the Framework overlap and intersect, and boundaries blur as students and staff work across multiple aspects of engagement simultaneously. It is relevant then to consider these dimensions as separate at the theoretical level (for the purposes of conceptual clarity) but much more closely aligned in practice. In the following section of this paper, we continue this theoretical separation, discussing the academic dimension of the Framework as a lens through which to describe two different ways the Framework has been used to enhance our practice.

Academic Engagement

At its most basic level, academic engagement comprises the attributes and skills that students bring to their learning, and those that they actively develop as they continue their academic pursuits (Marshall & Rowland, 2006; Scevak & Cantwell, 2007; Clarke, 2008). Some of these skills relate to communicating in the academic context, and include the processes and practices associated with reading, writing, speaking and listening within a discipline at a tertiary level. As with literacy skills at earlier stages of schooling, it is useful to think of these as a repertoire of practices related to the comprehension and production of texts via spoken and written language (Luke, Freebody & Land, 2000), which students must learn to apply in a flexible manner depending on context and purpose. These practices provide students with a means of entry into the discourses of the university and the profession, and are applied in combination (for example, as students harness appropriate evidence to present a cogent argument in an essay).

Along with the practice and mastery of these skills, in order to successfully engage with their studies, students must also be prepared to take "active control" of their learning, "by planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning" (Scevak & Cantwell, 2007, p. 37). This is the metacognitive component of academic engagement; in order to continue to develop and improve their academic skills, it is important that students reflect on their own capabilities, identifying areas of concern as well as areas of strength. In part, this is because literacy skills are always applied to a context; as that context changes and develops, so too do the demands upon the literacy skills of those who would seek to participate. Students must also understand the developmental nature of

their academic skills; in a sense, we are all constantly in the process of refining and improving our capacity to communicate as our literacy development is never 'finished' (Freebody, 2007).

It is important to note that academic engagement is not simply about acquiring a set of 'study skills'. Rather, our view of academic engagement aligns with the academic literacies field of research (Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 2006), which proposes that the processes involved in communicating within a particular discipline involve "both epistemological issues and social processes" (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 369). Engaging academically, from this perspective, requires students to consider what counts as knowledge within a discipline, and to become familiar with particular ways of communicating as they "unpack the ground rules of writing in any particular context" (Lea, 2004, p. 740). Adopting such a perspective has implications for the ways in which staff seek to engage students academically; given that the acquisition of academic literacies is a process involving entry to a new community with its own rules and patterns of language use, it is necessary to plan for the transition of *all* new members of the community, regardless of their proficiency with other forms of literacy or in other language communities.

We view academic engagement as a 'threshold' dimension: once students are able to understand and contribute to the discourses they encounter, other ways of engaging, particularly within the intellectual dimension, become more accessible. Teacher educators have a significant role in supporting students' academic engagement as they develop proficiency with the epistemological and cultural practices of education, develop the skills and capabilities that allow them to belong to this community, and also develop the metacognitive awareness that will enable them to continue to engage once they enter the professional community. The following section describes recent innovations in our practice as we use the Framework to shape our practice with a focus on academic engagement.

Innovative practices to support academic engagement

The Engagement Framework has offered a reference point for unit design and delivery within the Faculty since 2011. Over this time, efforts to better define and understand the dimensions of engagement have led to changes in practice, within and beyond the curriculum. These range from an embedded information literacy sequence across all Professional Studies units, to refinements in assessment tasks, and the development of Engagement Days for fully-online students. These innovations are described in turn.

The first compulsory Professional Studies unit is Foundations of Teaching, a 13-week first year subject offered in semester 1 each year. This is a Professional Experience-tied unit, meaning that part of the purpose of the unit is to prepare students for a 10-day full-time professional placement. Academic engagement, and an enhanced understanding of the academic requirements of becoming a teacher, are key goals of the unit and are identified explicitly in the learning outcomes, content, and assessment. Students also engage with the first of the embedded information literacy modules, which is explicitly assessed in two of the three assessment tasks.

The first assessment task specifically focuses on academic engagement, requiring students to complete a study plan outlining how they intend to develop their written communication and information literacy skills. Students must identify five specific skills they want to develop in each area, find resources that will help in that development, and then plan how they will use the resources to help them develop the skills they identified. The aim of this task is to support students' development as learners in this environment and to assist them in beginning the process of 'unpacking' the skills and knowledge required to succeed in education. This also aligns with our understanding of academic engagement as being, partly at least, about students planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning.

The second assessment task requires students to use their information literacy skills to compile an annotated bibliography on one of the areas of teachers' work explored in the unit, preparing an evaluative summary for each of the eight texts located for the task. Their audience for this assessment task is their peers.

The final assessment task is an exam, where students respond to a question they have constructed on one of the areas of focus throughout the unit. They are encouraged to focus on the area explored in the annotated bibliography as their wide reading will have provided them with a depth of information from which to adopt a critical stance. The audience for their exam response is a principal. This explicit focus on audience is a further innovation related to academic engagement, as it calls attention to the context-specific nature of literacy skills and knowledge. As noted earlier, academic engagement is a threshold dimension, and this task demonstrates how the explicit development of students' capacity to engage academically also allows them to engage fully in the intellectual demands of the unit. In the development of our practice of academically engaging students, and of encouraging them to engage academically, we were keen to embed practices that went beyond simply offering surface-level study skills workshops for students who appear to be struggling.

Academic engagement, however, is broader than the development of academic literacies. Engaging academically also involves understanding that learning is a process; an action. As such, it is something that can be planned for, monitored and evaluated, and these three elements are fundamental to this unit. Students plan for their learning in preparing their first assessment task, but there is also explicit attention paid to this in weekly tutorial activities. Students engage in monitoring and evaluating their own learning in this unit, a process that is at times challenging and confronting. Considering the dimensions of the Framework individually and explicitly has allowed for these developments within the curriculum.

Our developing understanding of the Engagement Framework allowed us to consider our practice more explicitly within the curriculum, and our attention to the Framework and academic engagement specifically led to initiatives beyond the curriculum. One such initiative was the introduction of Student Engagement Days [SEDs]. The SEDs represent a core component of our Faculty's engagement program, and are intensive one-day workshops, held at a number of intra- and interstate locations, open to all fully-online students regardless of specific course or unit enrolments. Each SED focuses on engaging students in the academic discourse of education, exploring ideas and conversations that go beyond specific curriculum areas or units of study. Topics explored in previous SEDs have included the goals and purposes of schooling, teacher identity, academic writing, and learning as a process. As SEDs are attended by students from our full range of degrees and across all year levels, the content must be broad enough to be relevant to a range of students, yet provocative enough to engage students intellectually and professionally.

This presents one of the key successes of the SEDs; they move beyond addressing only one dimension of engagement, and instead provide opportunities for students to make more effective and extensive connections, with each other and with the ideas being explored. Although the explicit focus of an SED may be engaging academically or intellectually, students also engage socially. Providing these opportunities for social engagement in a face-to-face context has the added advantage of enlivening the online environment, as students subsequently engage with discussion postings 'hearing' the staff member's voice and 'seeing' their gestures and facial expressions. This applies equally to their online interactions with their peers, and such interactions can have considerable impact in shaping a student's sense of belonging and identity as a university student and pre-service teacher (Moss & Pittaway, 2012). The impact of this sense of identity cannot be

overstated, and has implications for students' engagement with the institution: a key goal of many universities.

As the examples above illustrate, the Framework offers the potential for innovation both within and beyond the curriculum through paying particular attention to individual dimensions. As well as considering the dimensions individually, the Framework can be viewed holistically when planning for engagement across the student experience, which allows us to understand more fully the demands that engagement makes on students' academic, personal, social, intellectual and professional skills, knowledge, aspirations and dispositions.

Conclusion

As we have explored, engagement is a complex concept and to enhance engagement all those involved in teacher education must take account of this complexity. We propose that the Engagement Framework presented here offers a way of thinking about engagement that considers all aspects of students' learning and experience at university, moves away from defining engagement from only a behavioural, psychological, or socio-cultural perspective, and broadens the idea of engagement beyond measuring students' connection to the institution.

Through the lens of the Framework, academic engagement connects to all other dimensions of engagement. Our discussion on the academic dimension of engagement demonstrates that focussing on one dimension can allow us to consider more explicitly the ways we might set out to deliberately engage students, and to provide them with a means of considering their own engagement. However, our discussion also demonstrates that when we enhance our own practices in relation to one dimension, other dimensions are similarly enhanced.

The initiatives described in this paper present some early 'steps' in the process of planning within and beyond units using the Framework, and offer some indications of the value of basing practical innovation on a theoretical foundation. Clearly the next step in working with the Framework is to undertake focused empirical research, to ascertain the impact of these innovations through the eyes of students, tutors, lecturers, and unit developers/designers. This work, along with some initial investigation of the impact on learning outcomes for students, is currently underway.

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