Preface

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Maintaining criticality: attempts to stop an unacceptable proportion of students from feeling alienated

Many authors have drawn attention to the difficulty in defining student engagement (see, for example, Bryson, 2014; Dunne, 2016; Trowler, 2010). This difficulty is deepened by national differences that Buckley (2014) highlights, describing how, in the UK, student engagement is used to refer to issues of governance as well as pedagogy, whereas, in the USA, the term tends to focus more specifically on pedagogy. Trowler (2010), drawing on the work of others, highlights the behavioural, emotional and cognitive aspects of engagement, whilst Bryson emphasises the importance of acknowledging the differences between engaging students (what institutions do to engage students) and students engaging (what students do to engage). Anyone exploring student engagement faces the challenge of articulating the focus of engagement: for example, defining what is being engaged with (e.g. learning processes, learning design, online/classroom-based learning, extra-curricular activities, institutional governance - see Trowler, 2010) and whether student engagement is seen as a pre-condition/influence, a process or an outcome (see Kahu, 2013 for a helpful 'conceptual framework of engagement, antecedents and consequences'). Student engagement is a multi-faceted concept that overlaps with such related constructs and factors as student partnership and student motivation, as demonstrated in Dunne's (2016) recent list of the diverse ways in which student engagement activities are currently described in higher education and thus explaining the usefulness of a 'jargon buster' (Hancock, this issue) in some settings.

The work contained in this volume that reflects the work of the REACT Project is focused on engaging 'hard to reach' students. To add to the complexity of defining student engagement, many of the authors in this volume report the difficulties faced in defining 'hard-to-reach' students. Sims *et al* (this issue) outline a common range of student groups often considered to be 'hard to reach', including: part-time; commuters; first-generation; international; men; black and minority ethnic; mature; those with learning difficulties. However, several authors in this issue raise concerns that 'hard to reach' is a term that implies students are responsible in some way for being difficult or different and it is therefore their fault that they are disengaged in learning or in university life. Questioning the use of the term 'hard to reach' highlights that it may be staff and higher education institutions that actively disengage students by not responding effectively to the diversity of student voices. Our understanding of this more critical perspective may be enhanced by looking at the seminal work of Sarah Mann on student alienation: she identifies seven ways in which students are often alienated within and by higher education – outlined briefly here.

1) *The postmodern condition/social conditions mean alienation is inevitable.* Higher education's focus on performativity/skills and the neoliberal condition where education is seen as consumption lead to an inevitable alienation. These conditions remove a 'humanness' within higher education.

2) *In higher education discourse, students are located as subject/object.* This perspective constrains how students behave in relation to one another and the discourses they engage in. The student is alienated by being estranged from the language, practices and culture of higher education. They are "reduced by their position in the discourse as first-year student, to a type rather than to an individual" (Mann, 2001: 10). The student "…enters a pre-existing discoursal world in which they are positioned in various ways (as student, learner, competitor, debtor, consumer etc.), and in which more powerful others (lecturers, more

experienced students etc.) have greater facility, knowledge and understanding of higher education discursive practices" (Mann, 2001: 10).

3) *The student is an outsider.* Mann uses the metaphor of students' being "…a stranger in a foreign land" (Mann, 2001: 11), where s/he has to pass through checkpoints (e.g. matriculation), has limited knowledge of the culture and local language and is often alone. Alienation can result from powerful others imposing particular ways of understanding the world.

4) *Learning and teaching processes are often bereft of the capacity for creativity.* Being in a situation where one's creativity and autonomous self is not acknowledged, and where students have to acquiesce to course requirements and demands, leads to loss of a sense of self and to the potential for alienation.

5) *Loss of ownership of the learning and teaching process.* Drawing on Marx, Mann argues: "the work that is undertaken by students is not usually done for the good of the group of learners or other community, but in order to satisfy the requirements of the teacher and the institution, and for the mark that may be obtained. Thus, assessed work that a student produces can be seen as part of a system of exchange….The 'object', that is, what is produced, for example, the essay, no longer belongs to the student, but, because it is part of a system of exchange, the student belongs to it" (Mann, 2011: 13). This is alienation from the product of one's labour – the emphasis on assessment in higher education can lead to a focus on outcomes, not process. That teachers control most learning and assessment processes can lead to alienation.

6) *Assessment practices make students docile.* Assessment practices locate students in a hierarchy of success and expertise that "…suggests something about their worth in relation to others" (Mann, 2001: 15). The implications of this are most acute in situations where students fail and where assessment processes are most likely to lead to alienation.

7) *Leave me alone – alienation as a strategy for self-preservation.* A sense of self is created from a constant interplay of how others see and judge 'me' and so, for students to hold onto a sense of stability, they may seek to distance themselves from the learning process that is creating a feeling of dissonance and alienation. Students adopt surface approaches to learning and attempt where possible to escape the requirements of study if they feel dissociated from them.

What Mann's work helps to illuminate is that, in many instances, students' alienation is an understandable and logical response to the conditions they find themselves in, within the higher education context. Mann herself suggests five responses to these conditions: solidarity; hospitality; providing safety; redistribution of power; criticality. For now, I focus on the call to criticality. Mann states that "…a crucial way out of the experience of alienation, both for ourselves and for our students, is the development of the capacity to become aware of the conditions in which we work, and of the responses we make to them" (Mann, 2001: 17). Adopting a critical stance suggests that alienation – and in the case of the REACT Project, being hard to reach - is not inevitable and that we may need to question our own role in contributing to students' alienation and disengagement. This requires us to pose some radical questions and find solutions to them if we are to change these conditions and the ways in which we relate to students.

Mann argues that the sense of feeling an outsider is most likely to be experienced by 'non-traditional' or hard-to-reach students. We academics perhaps need to empathise with those students who don't feel that they can be themselves at university or who experience being outsiders (Glazzard, in this issue, provides research evidence of some specific student experiences of feeling an outsider). Just for a moment, try to think about what it feels like to

fear or dread turning up to class or a social event because you do not know anyone or because you do not fit in or feel that you belong. Think about what it feels like not to be invited to social events or to realise you haven't received an email that others have received. Consider how it feels to be completely at a loss as to what to do to meet the assessment requirements for your course and to feel that your teacher is unapproachable or unavailable. Sadly, this is the experience of many of our students. This sense of being out of place and not belonging is powerfully explored by Felten (this issue).

In contrast, "student engagement is about feeling connected, feeling like you belong somewhere and feeling valued" (Alison, this issue). Creating a sense of belonging is something that has been explored at the University of Winchester by Humphrey and Lowe (this issue) and Felten (this issue) describes how a reorientation, to consider the assets of *every* student, can help to create inclusive practices and environments for all, including those who often feel like strangers in a foreign land. Felten (2017) also outlines how we can co-create belonging through a) working together, b) creating space for exploration, such as partnership learning communities and c) affirming all partners. Indeed, many of the recent examples of partnership working and co-creation in higher-education curricular and extra-curricular work – found in this issue and elsewhere – are demonstrating a wide range of ways in which individuals, groups and institutions are challenging several of the conditions Mann highlights; conditions that are predicated on a power imbalance between staff and students, suppression of student voices and a lack of ownership of the learning and teaching process. Sims *et al* (this issue) point to the exciting findings from research into the three core REACT student engagement schemes at the Universities of Exeter, Winchester and London Metropolitan. They have found that students who participate in their institutional student engagement schemes have higher levels of attainment than the institutional student average and that no students who participated in these schemes withdrew from university. These findings point to tangible ways in which institutions can overcome student alienation and they constitute a direct challenge to the idea that student alienation is an inevitable condition of higher education.

So, despite the difficulties in defining student engagement, and the continuing overly-generalised dismissal of much student engagement work on the basis of its small scale, qualitative approaches and lack of theoretical basis (Trowler, 2010; Gourlay, 2016; MacFarlane and Tomlinson, 2017), we should be foolish to overlook the value of the work highlighted in this issue and the growing evidence of positive outcomes from much of this student engagement work. However, progress relies upon our remaining critical of our own and others' practices and institutional structures, in order to ensure that we become more aware of the voices and practices we suppress, wittingly or unwittingly. Remaining critical includes admitting where we get things wrong or where things need to change. It is great to see examples in this issue of refreshingly honest reflections on work that did not go quite as planned. We need to encourage an environment in which it is acceptable to share these real experiences so that all can learn from them. Marie *et al* (this issue) highlight that using the term 'hard to reach' might still be helpful in ensuring that we understand how to make institutions inclusive, whilst at the same time acknowledging the limitations of the term and the overlapping nature of different groupings of students. Goddard (this issue) suggests an alternative term for 'hard to reach' could be 'yet to be reached'. Whilst Cook-Sather and Porte (this issue) also critique the assumption about who is doing the reaching in 'hard to reach', they suggest that a more constructive approach might be to think about a more continuous reaching across that involves both students and staff in the reaching. These articles, the practices described and the reflections contained in them are testament to the many attempts being made across the UK higher education sector to enhance student engagement and to contest and critique practices and structures that continue to fail an unacceptable proportion of students.

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