BOOK REVIEW

Teacher and Student Perspectives on Student Engagement: Lessons for the Asian Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Namala Lakshmi TILAKARATNA[1]

[1] Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore

Address for Correspondence: Dr Namala Lakshmi TILAKARATNA. Centre for English Language Communication, #03-10, 10 Architecture Drive, Singapore 117511, Singapore.

Email: elcnlt@nus.edu.sg

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A review of *Understanding and Developing Student Engagement*
(2014) Colin Bryson (Ed). Routledge: New York

Varied understandings of student engagement (hereafter SE) include definitions of SE as evidence of learning outcomes, such as "skills development" and "transfer" and, additionally, related to issues of "identity" such as students' psychosocial development, social group identity formation, and self-image in educational contexts (see Harper & Quay, 2009). As editor Colin Bryson notes in his introduction to *Understanding and Developing Student Engagement*, one of the issues that emerge when examining SE is the difficulty of "measuring" a phenomenon that is so deeply complex. The overall aim of *understanding and developing* is to shift dominant research perspectives in SE from quantitative approaches, such as university level surveys and feedback that have emerged from a predominantly North American and Australasian context and dominates the literature (Trowler, 2010), to qualitative approaches which centralise the role of the individual student and the tutor in understanding SE, allowing for a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of what constitutes student engagement in higher education with a focus on emerging student identity over the course of their degrees.

In an overview of student engagement literature, Blumenfield and Paris (2004, cited in Trowler 2010) distinguish three dimensions in SE as "behavioural", including attendance and involvement, "emotional" engagement which includes a "sense of belonging" and finally, "cognitive" engagement focusing on an investment in learning. Bryson's edited volume is firmly entrenched in understanding "emotional" engagement and in giving a voice to the student in reflecting on their own experiences in relation to SE. In the introduction to this volume, Bryson notes that in light of the research findings of this book, which deviates from the dominant quantitative approaches to SE, a revised definition of SE could be the following:

> student engagement is about what a student brings to higher education in terms of goals, aspirations, values and beliefs and how these are shaped and mediated by their experience whilst a student. SE is constructed and reconstructed through the lenses of the *perceptions* and *identities* held by students and the meaning and *sense a student makes of their experiences and interactions* [emphasis mine] (p. 17).

In order to explore how students make sense of their "experiences and interactions" at university, *Understanding and Developing Student Engagement* is divided into three parts, each of which provides a unique understanding of SE. The first of these focusses on "students engaging" or the role that the student plays in the process of engagement, followed by a section that explores ways of "engaging students" by shifting the emphasis to the role that lecturers play in providing opportunities for students to engage in order to "develop transformatively" (p. 18). The first section deals with "students engaging" through the perspective of researchers focusing primarily on qualitative (interviews) and longitudinal research. Drawing on student narratives and stories of their experiences in a section titled "Students Engaging: Perspectives From Research", Chapters 2-4 focus on expectations and aspirations that students bring with them that are realised or manifested over the course of the students' entire degree programmes. The second part of the book titled "Students Engaging; Perspectives From Students" (Chapters 5-12), introduces the perspective of the students through self-reporting of their understanding of SE along with anecdotal evidence to support what students believe counts as evidence of SE. Thus, it fundamentally differs from the first three chapters in that there is an absence of commentary from researchers; instead, the chapters adopt an autoethnographic approach and allow students to critically reflect on their own journeys through their degree programmes while selecting experiences and themes that they think are most relevant in illuminating their own understanding of the concept. Finally, part three titled "Engaging Students" (Chapters 13-18) focusses on applied or "action" research-oriented perspectives on SE by looking at pedagogical best practices that help tutors and lecturers engage their students more effectively. Thus, it looks at measures lecturers can take to ensure student engagement in their programmes and explores how more enhanced engagement results in positive outcomes for teaching and learning. The final chapters include ways of developing student engagement in academic contexts in an ethical manner in order to enrich the student experience from a pedagogical perspective.

Importantly, all of the chapters in the first two parts of this book draw on longitudinal data and follow students through the unfolding of a subject or a degree, so that SE, as the editor states in the introduction to the book, emerges as a concept that is complex and changes over time, with students being more or less engaged over the course of their degree programmes. In addition, it is clear from this volume that SE is impacted by a number of intrinsic (e.g. aspirations, values and beliefs and emotional well-being) and extrinsic (financial, logistic, institutional) factors, all of which contribute to the increase or decrease in SE, and sometimes student achievement, over the course of their degrees.

In this manner, Bryson's volume contributes to existing literature on SE which proposes that a "sense of belonging" results in better SE and that "students who perceive themselves as belonging are more likely to persist because it leads not only to enhanced motivation but also a willingness to become involved with others in ways that promote further persistence" over the course of their degrees (Tinto, 2016).

In emphasising the role of the individual student and their understanding of SE, a number of themes emerge from the research conducted by the contributors to this volume. These include explorations into the personal difficulties faced by students in higher education and the need for more support resources in order to enable them to be more engaged; the need for trust between the lecturer and the students and finally, the need to move beyond "having" or "getting a degree" to "becoming" through identity formation of the undergraduate student. Bryson concludes his overview of the volume by suggesting that SE can only move forward through a "partnership" between lecturers and students and amongst students themselves rather than a focus exclusively on teaching or learning outcomes. This is supported by research in the volume which reports on different types of partnerships, including peer and tutor interaction in tutorial groups (Chapter 16) and mentorship programmes (Chapter 17) which foster face-to-face interaction with lecturers and tutors. According to the authors, fostering such partnerships allow students to better cope with the demands placed on them by the personal challenges they face and in transforming from a student to professional over the course of their degrees.

A key takeaway from this volume is that extrinsic factors impact greatly on students' capacity to engage effectively. For example, a major issue with retention that appears to be a recurring theme in the book is that students' motivation is impacted by their financial status or living arrangements. In Chapters 2-4 for instance, researchers note that students' personal issues impacted their capacity to be engaged during their degree and that a crucial element of ensuring their retention and success was the social networks and support services available to them during difficult times. Bryson further asserts in his conclusion that "a major factor in mitigating all the alienating forces is peer support and social networks. Without these supporting sources, many of these students would not have gone through to a successful culmination of their university studies" (p. 231). As this volume shows, one of the drawbacks of focusing entirely on the "learning outcomes" is that factors that are outside the control of the learning environment, such as personal and financial problems, which are important determiners of SE, remain largely underexplored in the literature [see for instance Trowler (2012) for

an overview] and this volume certainly fills this gap by allowing students to share their personal experiences and elaborate on the difficulties that impinge on SE over the course of their degrees.

The relationship between SE and external factors that Bryson and colleagues focus on is new to SE literature. Tinto (2012), for instance, identifies "support" and "involvement" as related to the "attributes of successful classrooms". What is most significant about this contribution is perhaps that Bryson's volume collates a number of studies previously occupied by what Trowler refers to as the "grey" literature in SE emerging from the UK which focuses on "small, single case studies" published in non-peer reviewed journals or disseminated as papers presented in conferences. With the publication of an edited volume on narrative and autoethnographic approaches to student identity, Bryson and colleagues are legitimising the use of the personal to complement the traditional quantitative and cognitively-oriented SE research and thus elaborating on what kinds of experiences impact SE.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: LESSONS FOR AN ASIAN SOTL

One of the questions raised when reading this volume is determining how applicable or relevant the research findings of *Understanding and Developing* is to the context of SoTL in Singapore. In other words, what lessons can we, as lecturers situated in an Asian SoTL context, learn from this research about how we can better engage our students?

In order to answer the question of purpose or why students need to be engaged, I turn to the recent edition of the *AJSoTL* where the editor, NTU Associate Professor Looker (2016) suggests that in a Singaporean context, SE includes both the students' involvement in content and the expansion of curriculum to provide students with increased opportunities for applying disciplinary knowledge. This view of engagement as leading to better learning outcomes is a central concern in the literature and is explicitly linked to the concept of "high quality learning" (Coates, 2005, p. 26). What is significant in Looker's (2016) description of SE in the Singaporean context is that it is focussed on "learning" and "teaching" outcomes. In contrast, in *Understanding and Developing Student Engagement,* Bryson and colleagues focus primarily on issues of "student identity" and the negotiation of this identity in the context of higher education. Despite the valuable contribution of the volume to providing an input into "emotional engagement" the methodological approach taken by the volume also results in a lack of discussion about learning outcomes as a measurable output and evidence of the positive effect of SE.

The discussion on how more or enhanced student engagement leads to better learning is presented in the last few chapters in the section on "engaging students" which provides suggestions as to how lecturers can better develop student engagement in their classrooms. This section in particular raises questions about the relevance of the methodology employed by the authors which they propose is a key contribution to the literature on SE. While, undoubtedly, the students perspectives on whether they are engaged or not provides teachers with interesting insights into what student engagement is, the extent to which this engagement can benefit both students and lecturers in enhancing how students engage with *knowledge* appears to be a missing. This leads to instances where authors privilege emotional engagement over knowledge and learning. For example, Foster and Southwell-Sander in Chapter 11 report on outstanding teacher awards that were entirely student-led and resulted in a clear message from students summarised as "if we [lecturers] want to engage them [students], then subject expertise is far less important than enthusiasm, passion and authentic engagement" (p. 150). This example shows a clear deviation from dominant research perspectives in the area. Tinto (2012), for instance, emphasises the *complementary* nature of SE to "lead not only to social affiliations and the social and emotional support they provide, but also to greater involvement in learning activities and the learning they produce". In other words, the emotional component of engagement, while a crucial factor of SE, should not take precedence over the learning, expertise and academic achievement that higher education institutions aim to provide, but instead present a more holistic understanding of SE that takes into account the complexity of SE as an important factor in HE.

A further issue with the methodological approach taken by the authors is that while the volume attempts to understand SE as concept that is "socially constructed and reconstructed by the student", requiring a richer description that is "multi-dimensional" and "holistic" (p. 18), the understanding of student identity formation in this text is also highly contextualised and personalised. This presents one of the major issues when examining the relevance of this volume to the context of Asian SoTL research. In other words, the situated narrative accounts of experiences of SE are particularly centred on engagement in a specific geographical and institutional context (e.g. British universities). This is evident in the accounts given by students in Chapters 5 to 10 which, for instance, elaborate on student's peer support groups consisting of friends and other students. In the Singaporean context, where local students live in close proximity to their families, emotional support would need to be extended to include the family unit. Thus these contextualised

accounts of SE focus on individual student's experiences as research findings cannot be easily generalised or transferred to an Asian context where the nuclear and extended family may in fact have a strong influence on a students' success in university. In other words, there appears to be little evidence to suggest, for instance, that what counts as SE, or the extrinsic factors that hinder SE in British universities, will necessarily translate to the Asian context and the authors make little attempt to make a connection between their research and its applicability or relevance to higher education in general.

Bryson and colleagues achieve what they propose to do in the introduction in that this book by providing a qualitative understanding of SE from the perspectives of the students themselves that counteracts the largely quantitative research on SE. While the findings may not be easily generalisable across contexts because it is situated in British universities, it raises several important questions about the fact that engaging with a complex issue such as SE requires a range of research methods, both quantitative and qualitative. Thus, while *Understanding and Developing Student Engagement* raises a number of questions about the relevance of such contextually situated narratives as the basis of understanding SE in an Asian context, it does so in a manner that draws attention to the fact that while SE appears to be a key concept that impacts both students and teachers in the context of higher education, it still remains largely unexplored and poorly understood, requiring greater attention from a range of research and methodological perspectives such as the one provided in this volume. For Asian SoTL research, the book challenges us to provide more nuanced and rich description of SE that adds to the extensive research that has, so far, emerged from primarily the North American and British context.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Namala TILAKARATNA is a Lecturer at the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC) at the National University of Singapore. Her research and teaching interests include systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and legitimation code theory (LCT). She is an associate member of the LCT Centre for Knowledge-building at the University of Sydney. She has a co-authored a chapter (with Dr Eszter Szenes and Professor Karl Maton) in the *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Thinking in Higher Education* and has published in peer-reviewed international journals including *Linguistic and the Human Sciences*.