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Title Perceived value in classroom contact: rising to the challenge of learner disengagement

Session What is valued in higher education? Identity, equity and engagement in and around the neoliberal university (Lomer)

Submitter Prof. Nicola Whitton, Prof. A. Mark Langan

Higher Education globally has seen an increasing use of metrics to rank institutions and influence income and profile, inevitably leading to greater commodification and instrumentality throughout the sector (Ball, 2012). The United Kingdom provides a prominent example of increased performativity HE sector, having some of the highest tuition fees and a controversial new 'Teaching Excellence Framework' (DfE, 2016).

The shift in the burden of finance from the state to students (Browne, 2010) has ignited discourses of value-for-money in higher education; such as the consumer orientation of students (Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2016) and the overly-simplistic notion of 'student as customer' (Budd, 2016). Contrary to these discourses, and despite the growing cost of a university education, and the association between attendance and attainment (Burd & Hodgson, 2006; Newman-Ford, Fitzgibbon, Lloyd, & Thomas, 2008), many students still elect not to participate in the full range of learning opportunities available to them. Learner attendance has become of increasing interest to the sector, as evidenced by the use of mechanisms to encourage engagement. These include an emphasis on rules of attendance and participation, coupled with surveillance and monitoring of student behaviour, which has been argued to reduce learner freedom and autonomy (Macfarlane, 2015).

To gain insights into the value that learners place on taught activities, we explored why students chose not to participate in available learning experiences at a large, post-92 institution. We undertook a qualitative investigation examining the perceptions of forty-seven undergraduates from three different disciplines (psychology, n=16; business, n=16; combined honours, n=15) selected because they were large and represented varied learner demographics. Five student co-researchers carried out a series of semi-structured interviews exploring learner expectations from university and reasons for deciding whether to attend taught classes. The co-researchers helped to embed a learner perspective and we felt that responses would be more authentic when disclosed to peers. Each interview was based around a set of open-ended core questions, designed in conjunction with the student co-researchers, with opportunities for the discussion to move in a variety of ways depending on the directions the conversations took, and the interview length was approximately 30 minutes. Participants received a small payment for their time, and were recruited through course leaders and ad hoc approaches by the student researchers. Each interview was recorded and transcribed in full for analysis. The project was approved by the institution's ethics committee before commencement.

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to draw out key features and similarities in the way that students spoke about their experiences and decisions. This approach was used because it is flexible, straightforward to apply and describe, and produces rich descriptions of emerging themes from the data. In this study, we found four key themes: the perceived value of the class; conflicting priorities; the influence of peers; and the accessibility of the learning experience. Students perceived a class to be valuable when it offered something more than 'reading off the slides' and was too difficult to be self-taught from text books or online resources, particularly when it was explicitly related to assessment. Conflicting priorities were a common cause for non-attendance; in some cases these we related to paid work schedules or family commitments,

but most were associated with pressures from assessment, particularly where multiple assessments were due concurrently. For some, particularly younger, students peer influence was a contributing factor to attendance, because non-participation was normalised and easy access to social media communication meant that students were able to make last-minute decisions about attendance, making choices based on peer influence even when already on campus. Finally, the accessibility of classes, in terms of venue or timing, was an issue for a small number of students.

Two dominant themes emerged from the analysis, which influenced learner decisions to attend a taught class; the perceived value of that class, and the presence of conflicting priorities that were valued more. These were both underpinned by student attitudes towards assessment. There was evidence that students were clearly behaving in instrumental ways; first, by the attribution of added value to learning experiences that were directly related to assessment, and second, by the prioritisation of assessment activities over engagement in taught classes. For example, the following quote underlines the assumption that attendance at a lecture is only valuable if it is to be assessed:

“It depends on the content. If it was relevant to the exam then I’ll definitely attend, but if it’s not then that’s not really important.”

In contrast, the next quote shows how the value placed on assessment affects a student’s decision-making process in a negative way:

“You’ve got to prioritise, and when things aren’t related to your outcome of a degree at this point you just don’t go. Like last week we had two guest lecturers, and if that hadn’t been the week of my dissertation I would have gone – but I had to prioritise finishing my dissertation obviously, and unfortunately I didn’t go.”

Throughout the data, the prominent role of assessment in shaping decisions on whether or not to participate in taught classes was clear. Given the dominant performative cultures within Higher Education globally, which permeate from policy, to management, to academics, it is hardly surprising that we see students adopting strategic and instrumental approaches to their participation with learning activities. This highlights the importance of not viewing issues such as student engagement or assessment regimes, as isolated elements, but as part of a wider neoliberal eco-system. Only by discussing these instrumental assessment-driven behaviours in the context of an increasingly outcome-driven global Higher Education sector, might we begin consider possibilities for breaking this spiral of performativity. With the current focus on assessment, surveillance of behaviour, and the value of learning gains, the rights of the students to be free to learn as adults are undermined (Macfarlane, 2016). It is important that we not lose sight of the role of higher education for developing autonomous thinkers, and giving learners the right to fail, and learn from those failures.

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