

# Engagement and participation: Same same or different and why does it matter?

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## Abstract

*In this paper, we raise questions about engagement and participation: what are the implications of one being a proxy for the other? We adopt a narrative approach drawing on the example of Joel, a current first year student, who achieves high levels of success despite remaining almost entirely 'invisible' within his online classroom. We draw on our earlier work presenting an Engagement Framework, further articulating and challenging our principles of engagement and the underlying assumptions about the necessity of social interaction for student engagement and success. We argue that for students such as Joel, we must be careful that initiatives designed to increase 'participation' do not end up decreasing the focus on meaningful engagement. Looking beyond participation as a measure of student learning allows us to develop more nuanced understandings of engagement, and to design units, assessments and experiences that reflect a wider range of possibilities for learning and success.*

## Introduction

Joel, a 27-year-old first year student, is the first in his family to attend university. Joel grew up in a low socio-economic area in one of Australia's capital cities and attended local public schools. After finishing Year 10, he spent four years in the defence force before moving into the fitness industry and now is keen to determine a long-term future direction for his life. He studies as a fully online part-time student at a university on the other side of the country and has reduced his work as a personal trainer to part-time in order to focus on study. Joel had started a university course in the same discipline (primary teaching) as an on-campus student several years ago but withdrew after successfully completing one semester.

Joel considers himself highly engaged in his learning: he reads the weekly readings preferring hard copy over virtual textbooks - he finds the use of sticky coloured flags useful in highlighting sections of the text that are particularly significant for him and his learning. He listens to the recordings of synchronous online web conferences, choosing this over attending them synchronously as he can re-listen when he feels he needs to understand a point more fully. Other students add him to unit-specific Facebook groups, and he reads others' questions and responses; he also reads the announcements from his lecturers in the LMS, the weekly notes and posts from his peers.

He has a mentor (a former teacher educator he met through his role as a personal trainer, and thus not someone officially associated with the university or his course of study) and meets with him on a regular basis, talking through ideas in order to deepen and broaden his understanding of

concepts introduced and explored in the unit materials. Joel seeks feedback from his mentor on his written communication before submitting assignments. Written communication and referencing are a focus of Joel's first year units – tutors regularly emphasise their focus on this aspect of assignment submission and Joel is keen to get this part of university study right and spends considerable time reworking his writing and checking referencing and formatting. He's successfully sought casual work as a relief teacher aide as a way of determining if this is really the career he wants, and this work allows Joel a glimpse of how theory might be applied in practice.

While Joel is engaged in a range of ways (intellectually, personally, academically and professionally) he does not participate in a traditional sense. He has uploaded a photo of himself to the LMS but has not contributed to online discussion forums. He does not participate in the Facebook groups he has been added to and does not attend synchronous online sessions. He sits at the edges of the learning community and could be said to not engage socially – at least not with his fellow students (most of whom are older females), and not with his tutors. The only time his tutors would know Joel is a student in their unit is when he submits an assignment. So far, he has been highly successful in the four units he's studied this year, gaining at least a distinction in three.

After speaking with Joel, I (author 1) open the online unit I'm currently teaching (not at the same university Joel attends) and a student's assignment pops into the online assignment drop box. I'm momentarily surprised. I don't recognise this student's name – haven't seen it on the discussion forums, didn't read an introduction from this student, have had no contact with him/her. This student hasn't participated at all, and I'm left to wonder if this student has engaged at all? Is this student like Joel, someone who engages with the materials and the ideas and concepts explored in the unit, with the profession, and with developing their academic skills and capabilities but not with me or other students?

I am interested in my own response to seeing this student's assignment, particularly as it comes immediately after meeting with Joel and recognising his level of engagement as legitimate. Why does this other student's lack of visibility, their lack of participation, cause me a moment's hesitation? Has this student engaged in other ways, just not socially?

It's easy for a teacher to take this lack of participation personally – we spend a lot of time designing a unit, thinking about authentic tasks to assess students' learning, choosing readings, writing and recording lectures/provocations, preparing synchronous online classes, writing content and questions to challenge and extend students' thinking. We put a lot of our time and energy into teaching and we can take it personally when many students either don't show up at all or remain invisible to us apart from at assessment time. If we teach on-campus, we decry the lack of attendance and link it with a lack of interest and/or motivation, and we wonder how students can achieve the learning outcomes if they don't at least attend. We like to think that doing more than 'turning up' is necessary, but then they pass the unit anyway and at our lowest moments we're sometimes left wondering why we bother.

But does a lack of participation mean a lack of engagement? It is this question that speaks to the importance of distinguishing between participation and engagement, particularly in an era where engagement is high on many universities' agendas. To further explore this and other questions, we need to be clear about the characteristics of both engagement and participation. In this paper we explore these questions – not to provide answers but as a way of generating thinking and raising

ideas that might help others explore these questions for themselves. Our intention is to open up a conversation by sharing our thinking, not to convince you of a particular view but rather to provoke thought.

One problem we immediately encounter is that there is no standard definition of engagement used across the sector and different academics will have different understandings and views about what constitutes participation. In the following section, we briefly explore definitions of engagement and present our own response to the challenge of defining engagement. In exploring engagement, we highlight some of the ways in which engagement can be understood to be about more than simply participating.

## **Defining engagement**

Engagement is a fuzzy term that doesn't have a standard, widely used definition. Indeed, it has been noted in the literature as a key criticism of research into student engagement that the term remains under-theorised (Kahn, 2014). Trowler and Trowler (2010) have noted the potential danger of this lack of conceptual clarity, which is "that people run the risk of talking past each other when discussing how to enhance student engagement within their institution, thinking they are talking about the same thing when in reality they are not" (p. 225). Tight (2019) similarly notes that there are considerable overlaps in the literature between student engagement and student retention, and that the lack of clarity within and beyond each can serve to obscure rather than illuminate our understanding. However, these concerns should not be taken to imply that no definitions exist. At the meta-level, Kahu (2013) proposes that student engagement research draws from four perspectives: behavioural, psychological, socio-cultural, and holistic, with each perspective holding different views of the link between student (and teacher) behaviour and success.

More specifically, student engagement, according to Axelson & Flick (2011, p. 38), "has come to refer to how *involved* or *interested* students appear to be in their learning and how connected they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other". Similarly, the Australian Council of Education Research (ACER, 2011) defines engagement as "students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning" (p. 3). This suggests engagement is a shared responsibility between students and teachers. Teachers have to design the activities and set the conditions with which students are involved, and it also means students have to do something - they need to take some action in order to be *involved*.

## **An engagement framework**

To that end in 2012 I (author 1) published an engagement framework developed over years of scholarship, research, teaching and assessing, and in/formal conversations with students and fellow teachers/academics. This framework addressed the question: *how* do students engage? ACER's definition of engagement fits in the sense that it aligns with our view of learning as an act of shared responsibility.

To contextualise the framework a set of principles were developed to underpin it which considered the wider environment in which engagement happens in formal learning contexts – both on-campus and online. (Author 1's) thinking was strongly influenced by her familiarity with the needs

of online students, those who are often non-traditional (mature age, first in family, female), and so this framework was developed with the online student in mind.

### *Principles of engagement*

The principles are an important foundation for the framework and should be kept in mind when thinking through the implications of the dimensions of engagement. The principles, based on a broad sweep of the literature, are:

1. To engage students, staff must also be engaged (Middlecamp, 2005; ACER, 2011).
2. The development of respectful and supportive relationships is paramount for learning and teaching (Allodi, 2010).
3. Students are given – and take – responsibility for their learning (Allen & Clarke, 2007; Scevak & Cantwell, 2007).
4. Students develop knowledge, understandings, skills and capacities when their learning is scaffolded, high standards are set, and expectations are clearly communicated (Krause, 2005; Dunn & Rakes, 2011).

These principles inform the conditions within which students are ‘involved’ in their learning, and, as Brady (2004) notes, those students who ‘complement and interpret what they learn from others with direct knowledge based on personal experience ... and who recognise learning’s moral implications and consequences’ are ‘engaged learners’ (p. 3). These principles and understandings frame our thinking about engagement as a reciprocal responsibility: students aren’t solely responsible for engagement and neither are teachers. How might we let students know about this shared responsibility? What messages do our marketing campaigns give about this notion of responsibility for engagement? What messages does the consumer culture of higher education give to students and what expectations do those messages set up? Are those expectations ever explored and articulated, either formally within class or informally through wider university programs?

The first principle is informed by the work of academic leaders such as Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2010) who proposed the idea of social, cognitive and teacher presence. We understand presence to be about more than simply ‘being there’; rather, it is built from active engagement in the teaching and learning endeavour. All involved in teaching can be present, from a unit chair who may have responsibilities for the design of meaningful tasks and assessments and developing a unit in such a way that a consistent and coherent learning ‘thread’ can be followed, through to tutors who model presence in seminars and tutorials by engaging with the ideas and opinions shared by students in responding to these tasks.

Developing relationships with students is important to us, but it may not be as important to all those who teach in universities. We are primarily teacher educators and to us relationships are at the heart of the education endeavour. Many teacher educators develop positive and supportive relationships with their students because they subscribe to humanist ideals of education: getting to know students as unique individuals and working to meet their educational needs is in-built for many of us. How might this apply to those who teach in other disciplines? Is a humanist perspective relevant to others outside of teacher education? This principle, however, goes beyond the student-Engagement and participation: Same same or different and why does it matter?

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teacher relationship. There are other relationships at work in the education endeavour, for instance: student-student; student-learning; student-university, student-self. These multiple relationships require deliberate development and careful thought when planning for engagement in teaching and learning activities.

The third principle, although seemingly simple, has significant implications for teaching and engagement. As teachers we often, possibly without clearly articulating it to ourselves, expect that our university students will be independent, autonomous learners, and then we teach in ways that puts the teacher at the centre and in charge of ‘delivering’ content. The teacher is seen by students as, and sometimes see themselves as, the content expert and we can fall into the trap of thinking that if we don’t tell students what they need to know, they won’t learn it. Teaching as telling does not develop autonomous, independent learners. This principle means we need to carefully examine our assumptions about teaching and learning and reflect honestly on our actual practice, rather than our assumed practice. It’s easier to write and deliver a lecture on something we know a lot about than teach in student-centred ways that build from humanist, agentic and cognitive perspectives and that seek to genuinely and authentically engage students in the ideas and concepts inherent in the discipline. And sometimes our institutions get in the way – we are the sole teacher of 500+ students, we’re allocated certain hours for teaching as part of workload allocation models and if we step outside them something else has to give. As research is often a vital contributor to university rankings, we shy away from reducing our research time because we don’t want to be, even partly, responsible for a slide down the rankings.

That’s not to trivialise the importance of university rankings or of research, but rather to acknowledge that teachers in universities are often caught in the cross-fire between their obligations to their students and to the institution more broadly. Despite the tensions, what does it mean at a practical level to give students responsibility for their learning? How do we get that message to them and do we know how we might enact that in our virtual or located seminar rooms? How do we ensure students take responsibility for their learning – and is that really our job? If students are not demonstrably ‘active’ in participating in available forums, how do we know if they are learning independently, or indeed learning at all? When this visibility is seen as a proxy for engagement it might cause us to introduce strategies that are inauthentic into our teaching.

The final principle involves three related concepts: scaffolding, setting expectations, and communicating standards. Scaffolding is a term from a cognitivist perspective on learning and requires teachers to think about unit design and teaching in specific ways. Scaffolding is not the same as handholding, something most academics work hard to avoid. There seems to be no worse criticism of a university teacher than that they’re holding students’ hands as they progress through their course.

Scaffolding, particularly in first year, could be thought of as deliberately designing support for student learning in the first instance to help them move from not being able to do something to doing that something with the support of a more knowledgeable other, to being able to do it by themselves. This is done in the full knowledge that across the semester, year or degree those supports will be removed to allow students to learn more independently.

Giving students agency is one aspect of scaffolding and might mean giving them a choice about whether they ‘turn up’. What are we doing in our teaching to encourage student attendance, to

welcome and value it, and how do we use student contributions as material for intellectual exploration, extension and challenge?

The reason setting high standards is included in this set of principles is possibly self-evident: we want our students to strive to achieve at the highest levels. While it might be true that gaining a pass leads to a university qualification, many counter that it doesn't guarantee a job. How clear do we make our standards to students and what supports do we put in place to help them work towards the high standards we set? Do we know what a high quality piece of work looks like and do we show exemplars of high quality work to students? Outside of the assessment sphere, can we articulate our own high standards in terms of discussion posts or responses in on-campus tutorials and can we (do we) communicate these standards to students?

However, it is the final element of principle 4 that is perhaps the most important. Having clear, and clearly communicated, expectations is vital for student engagement and ultimately for student success. What are our expectations of our students, of those teaching with us in the same unit, and what are our expectations of ourselves as teachers? What opportunities do we provide to students to articulate to themselves, their peers and their teachers their own expectations – of themselves, the experience of studying/learning, their classmates, their teacher/s, and of the unit/s they're studying?

Mismatched expectations can be a source of significant tension, especially in the early months of university study while students are adjusting to the reality of studying. Marketing material that shows groups of students sitting around a table all with laptops open and engaging in animated discussion will not be an immediate reality for the student studying online and at a distance from the university campus. Coming to terms with the actual reality, rather than the 'marketed reality' may take some time, particularly if the student doesn't fully understand this source of unease. Giving students an opportunity to voice their expectations may help teachers and students moderate their expectations to something more reflective of reality (Moss & Pittaway, 2018).

These principles act as a foundational guide for the five dimensions of the Engagement Framework and help ground our work in a student-focused manner. They help shape our ideas about engagement and give us ways of considering the differences between engagement and participation, and for developing more nuanced approaches to student engagement in relation to unit, assessment and tutorial design.

While these principles help shape our teaching practice how do they intersect/interact with Joel's reality and his experience and expectations of study? Joel has refused opportunities to develop relationships with his tutors and peers, but that does not necessarily imply that he hasn't developed relationships and better understandings of himself as a learner, of the content he's engaging with and with industry. He's taking responsibility for his own learning – he knows it is up to him and that at this point in time that responsibility doesn't require interactions with others in the units he is studying. He has interactions with his mentor, he works part time to allow himself time to study, he sets a study schedule – he does all the things student learning advisors suggest in developing effective study habits. While Joel is not responsible for the actions inherent within principle 4, he has expectations of himself that go beyond achieving minimum standards. He takes study seriously, has a learner mindset and is keen to succeed. His results attest to his commitment.

But his lecturers, tutors and peers won't know much, if anything, about him. He'll be a name on an assignment and one of those students grouped in the 'non-engaged' category. Joel's engagement is invisible to those with whom he's studying, but this should not be taken to imply that it doesn't exist. He doesn't participate, but that doesn't mean he doesn't engage.

This begs the question of whether we value participation or engagement more highly. Do we know what it is we want when we talk about engagement and the dis/engaged learner? Placing a value on participation leads to strategies that force participation in ways that tend toward inauthenticity (in-class polls using clickers, discussions with those sitting close by, discussions in synchronous online web conferences – strategies often called 'active learning'), or when we hold the view that students will only do what is assessed (online quizzes that carry up to 5 or 10% weighting towards the final mark or marks for attendance) we reduce engagement to something that doesn't encompass the many other ways students engage in their own learning. These other ways of engaging can lead to more nuanced understandings of engagement that don't necessarily require social interaction with tutors and peers.

### **Beyond participating: Dimensions of engagement**

The initial question we posed in 2012 about how students engage led to the development of five dimensions encapsulated in an Engagement Framework (Pittaway, 2012). These five dimensions provide other ways of thinking about engagement that go beyond student participation as the sole measure of learning or even to students' attitude towards learning. They provide ways for university teachers to think about unit, assessment and seminar/tutorial design and to question their own assumptions about whether students need to participate in order to learn.

The five dimensions of the Engagement Framework are: Personal; Academic; Intellectual; Social; and Professional. That is, students engage personally, academically, intellectually, socially and professionally. Pittaway (2012) has published elsewhere a brief outline of these dimensions and published other work on the application of the engagement framework in a variety of teaching and learning contexts: music education in pre-service teacher preparation (Baker & Pittaway, 2012), engagement and orientation (Pittaway & Moss, 2013a), and engagement and the online learning and teaching space (Pittaway & Moss, 2013b; Pittaway & Moss, 2014). These publications, and the publications of others who have drawn on the framework (see for example, Redmond, et al., 2018; Tomas, et al., 2015), attest to its capacity to differentiate between different elements of engagement to allow a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which students engage.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed description of each of the five dimensions of engagement, below is a brief synopsis of each dimension. **Personal** engagement refers to students' self-efficacy, resilience, and their belief that they can succeed and that university is a worthwhile pursuit. **Academic** engagement relates to students' awareness and application of skills and knowledge that underpin academic success, recognising that whatever their specific field of study, all students must acknowledge the requirements of the university context in order to achieve success; before they are nurses or teachers or engineers, they are students. **Intellectual** engagement refers to students' engagement with the 'what' of their studies: the ideas, debates, and threshold concepts of their discipline. **Social** engagement relates to students' interactions with their peers and university staff in both formal and informal contexts, and is often suggested to be central to students' success (c.f. Price & Tovar, 2014). **Professional** engagement refers to the ways in

which students engage in activities that enable them to apply their skills and knowledge in a manner that is directly relevant to their discipline; this may differ by discipline but may include for example internships and involvement with professional bodies.

While all dimensions of the framework are important, our focus here is social engagement as it is the dimension that seems to most closely align with participation. Many universities have learning and teaching principles which underpin the practice of unit and assessment development. It is not uncommon for one of those principles to be that all learning is active and collaborative. Bonwell and Eisen (1991) noted that to learn actively students must ‘read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems. Most important, to be actively involved, students must engage in such higher-order thinking tasks as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation’ (p. iii). Over the years and with the advent of technological advancements in our teaching spaces active learning has come to mean strategies that require students to interact with each other in some way, whether that’s through turning to a neighbour to discuss a question posed by the lecturer and visible on the screen, or through more ‘high tech’ capabilities such as clickers and online polling with the results available in real time and able to be discussed with a neighbour either present physically or virtually.

Social engagement is not limited to discussions with peers synchronously or asynchronously or engagement with technologies that seek to collect responses from students. Students such as Joel may wish to engage socially at their own pace and as they feel comfortable and confident in this new learning environment. Some students will feel confident to participate from day one – they will involve themselves in university clubs and societies, will attend class, develop friendships with others, make themselves known to their tutors and lecturers. They’ll ask questions and willingly volunteer to provide a summary of the discussion they’ve just had in their group.

There is another group of students though, like Joel, who will want to interact at their own pace, developing confidence in themselves as learners in the university environment before taking what for them is a big step, the initiative to post an introduction, respond to an online discussion prompt, attend a synchronous online class, interact on the Facebook group. Those students like Joel may feel unsafe if pushed into participating with others too early in their university studies.

This is the final provocation of our paper, then; to encourage our colleagues to consider engagement broadly, and to find ways of working with our students that respect their needs and expectations, recognising that these needs may go beyond participation. What might it look like, to design a unit that emphasises student agency, and provides opportunities for students to engage intellectually, professionally, personally, and academically? What sorts of tasks might we design that provide the space for all students to engage, not just those who speak first or loudest?

Joel is active in his own learning, questioning what he reads and hears, analysing, synthesising and evaluating the information and points of view to which he’s exposed. He just doesn’t do that with his peers or tutors – yet. If we use participation as a proxy for engagement, we might drive away those like Joel who want to ease into interacting with others, and we might also, perhaps more damagingly, introduce inauthentic learning experiences for students. This is much more likely to do the opposite of what we’re trying to achieve – we might disengage students through reductionist teaching strategies that increase participation but at the cost of engagement.

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