Theorising student engagement in higher education

Peter E Kahn*
University of Liverpool

Abstract

Student engagement has become problematic following the rise of mass and universal forms of higher education. Significant attention has been devoted to identifying factors that are associated with higher levels of engagement, but it remains the case that the underlying reasons for student engagement and, indeed, the notion itself of ‘student engagement’ remain weakly theorised. In this article, we seek to develop the theoretical basis for student engagement in a way that highlights the student’s own contribution. We explore how learning involves students taking responsibility for action in the face of uncertainty, whether in pursuit of personal or communal concerns. Drawing on perspectives primarily from realist social theory, we suggest that student engagement may be shaped by extended, restricted and fractured modes of reflexivity and co-reflexivity. In this way student engagement in higher education is theorised as a form of distributed agency, with the impact of a learning environment on this agency mediated by reflexivity. Reflexivity itself is further influenced by the tasks and social relations encountered by students in a given learning environment. The role that social relations play in students’ responses to learning specifically offers a means to strengthen the moral basis for education. Our account provides an explanation as to why specific educational practices, such as those termed ‘high impact’, might lead to higher levels of student engagement within the wider context of a knowledge society. We thus offer insights towards new forms of educational practice and relations that have the potential to engage students more fully.

Key words: Student learning, student engagement, reflexivity, high-impact practices.


Note: The text for the main body of the article that is provided here is the version initially submitted to the journal, prior to the peer review process. A number of minor changes were introduced through the peer review process.

Introduction

Student engagement in higher education has increasingly become a matter for concern in recent years. Trow (2006) points out that as a greater proportion of an age cohort attends university, then attendance effectively becomes compulsory and student engagement becomes problematic. In its most immediate sense, student engagement refers to the contribution that students make towards their learning, as with their time, commitment and resources (Krause & Coates, 2008). More broadly, though, the review by Trowler (2010, p. 3) suggests that the literature sees student engagement as pertaining to the ‘interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution’. Clear links have been established between the engagement of students and variables such as student retention (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie,
& Gonyea, 2008) and academic performance (Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2010). Higher education institutions evidently stand to gain a good deal from any capacity to foster an engaged student body.

Research has also begun to identify specific educational practices that are particularly effective in engaging students. Studies using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the USA, for instance, have been able to establish a set of practices that have a high impact on student engagement (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). While such an approach may assist in selecting educational practices, though, it leaves the underlying concept ‘student engagement’ relatively weakly theorised. (Kuh & Schneider, 2008), for instance, identified ways in which the level of academic challenge, the presence of active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction and a supportive campus environment contribute to student engagement, but without seeking to theorise how these elements work together to effect gains of various kinds. Such studies tend to emphasise the way in which student engagement is linked to given institutional or student characteristics, but Carini et al (2006, p. 23) emphasises that only a relatively modest proportion of the variation in learning outcomes can be accounted for through measures of student engagement based on survey instruments. Coates (2006, p. 57) has argued that this framework from Kuh and Schneider is the most advanced existing conceptualisation of the phenomenon, but it remains the case that it downplays the student’s own role in shaping their own engagement. To what extent are students able to exercise intentional causality in the way that they approach their studies? It is no surprise that Fredricks et al (2004) called for a richer view of how ‘students behave, feel, and think’ in understanding the notion of engagement.

A number of researchers have begun to fill out engagement from the perspective of the student. In considering how students approach their studies and the tasks involved, Mann (2001) contrasts engagement with the notion of ‘alienation’. Mann views alienation from a range of perspectives, including the student as outsider in respect of their capacity to participate and as one who is unable to engage in the unfolding discourse. Contributions within Harper and Quaye (2009) adopt a range of theoretical lenses, including possible selves theory, transition theory, critical race theory, attribution theory and others. This approach draws attention to the sweep of factors that might be relevant to student engagement in various settings, although the primary emphasis on diverse populations of students draws one away from the agency of the individual student. Elsewhere, Harper and Quaye (2009) emphasises that engagement involves more than simply participating in some practice, but is accompanied by a range of feelings around those practices, and an attempt to make sense of the activity.

Given both the relative lack of attention to theoretical explanation of student engagement and the finding that significant variation in engagement occurs at the level of the individual, it is worth considering the application of further theoretical perspectives. In looking to develop a theoretical account of student engagement in this paper, we turn initially to the realist social theory of Margaret Archer (2003, 2007), which highlights how reflexivity mediates the influence of structure on agency. Archer sees reflexivity seen as ‘the regular exercise of mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa’ (2007, p. 4). She argues that reflexive deliberation involves a mental process in which the object under consideration is bent back upon the subject doing the considering, whether through planning, prioritising, imagining, rehearsing, monitoring or so on. While much of her realist social theory has been developed in relation to social mobility, studies that draw on her work have begun to address educational matters (see, e.g. Clegg (2005), Czerniewicz et al. (2009), Kahn et al. (2012) and Williams (2012)).

In considering reflexivity, though, there is evident overlap with the literature on the regulation of learning, including in this studies that relate to the role of motivation and metacognition (Boekaerts, Pintrich, & Zeidner, 2000). Mutch (2010), indeed, argues that there is a need for studies that consider the overlap between the fields of psychology and sociology in relation to the study of reflexivity. Haggis (2009) also highlights the need for theories of student learning to draw on a more sophisticated approach to theorising the individual and society, taking into account recent developments in these two fields. We thus incorporate into our argument reference to the literature on the regulation of learning, while also drawing on further sociological studies and on wider studies into student learning. In this way we are able to demonstrate the explanatory power of our theoretical account. Our object in this paper is to offer an
overview as to how Archer’s work can be extended to student engagement, considering how such engagement manifests itself as the exercise of agency in given environments for learning.

Charting a course through the unknown

A programme of education typically requires students to engage with specific sets of tasks and activities. Where higher education is concerned, there are choices to be made about how much time is devoted to one’s studies, and about such considerations as where and how one studies. There is significant scope for variation in how, or whether, a student carries forward their learning. For Archer (2003), intentional courses of action are given concrete shape in the pursuit of specific projects. It is helpful here to characterise a specific task or closely related set of activities conducted by a student as part of their programme of education as a project, or learning project. In itself this conception of a learning project operates at a relatively general level. Ashwin (2009) uses a similar conception to ground a range of different accounts of the way that structure and agency interact with each other in educational settings. Archer’s account, though, emphasises the role that reflexivity plays in shaping the projects that one chooses to undertake and the way that they are distinctively progressed. She suggests it is through the exercise of varied modes of reflexive deliberation that individuals prioritise their concerns and embark upon specific courses of action within given social settings.

At the most basic of levels, the literature on the regulation of learning has established that learning does need to be regulated. This is the case not only for the cognition entailed in learning, but also for the behaviours and motivation expressed by students, as Pintrich (2000) argues. Specific strategies, for instance, that have been shown to enhance a student’s own motivation include self-consequating, interest enhancement and self-talk in pursuit of goals (Wolters & Rosenthal, 2000). Regulation may also be seen to involve various phases, for instance taking in mental activity that is focused on forethought, activation, monitoring, control and reaction (Pintrich 2000). Studies on metacognition similarly emphasises the role that the learner plays in monitoring and controlling their own cognitive activity (Flavell, 1979). While Martin and McLellan (2007) highlight the proliferation of terms around self regulation, significant overlap is present with the relatively open notion of reflexive deliberation.

Furthermore, it is clear that learning inherently involves one in progressing projects in unfamiliar contexts. Jarvis (2012) suggests that uncertainty plays a role in impelling learning quite generally. Perkins (2006) characterises some parts of knowledge as particularly troublesome, in providing experiences of alienation for students. Such factors as the novelty of the context, the presence of incongruities or the range of possible ways forward are all related to the challenges entailed in learning. Even beyond this sense of a novice grappling with what is unfamiliar, though, Barnett (2004) argues that uncertainty increasingly characterises life even for the expert. On-going gains in knowledge suggest that the world is radically unknowable, and this results in challenges both for novice and expert. Stehr contends that where a society is predicated on the creation and use of knowledge, then ‘ever greater scope to critically deconstruct and reassemble knowledge claims’ (2001, p. 139). Barnett argues that students need to come to terms with anxiety, and that human flourishing involves ‘living effectively amid uncertainty’ (2004, p. 257). Archer (2003) specifically highlights the role that changes of context and uncertainty play in generating the need for reflexive deliberation. The way that a student is confronted with uncertainty thus represents a key feature of a learning environment, a term that we use here to refer to the context within which learning occurs, taking in the programme of education to be followed and interactions with others.

This account of learning, though, initially places the regulation of a learning project within the purview of the individual student. But a longstanding body of research also points to the social basis of knowledge and its acquisition (Jarvis, 2012). Recent research has emphasised the need to consider social goals within the regulation of learning. Volet et al (2009) suggest: ‘There is, however, a growing conceptual agreement in the literature from both sociocultural and socio-cognitive perspectives that both self and social forms of regulation are needed to understand regulation in actual learning activities.’ This suggests that we need to widen the frame of our discussion beyond the agency of the individual learner, to
include the way that groups of learners and tutors pool their agency together. Archer herself uses the notion of corporate agency (2003, p. 133) to refer to the way that a group of individuals articulate their aims and develop organisation to realise these aims. In our setting, corporate agency can be said to involve the pursuit of learning communal projects, as Luckett and Luckett (2009) saw in relation to first generation learners in higher education. Dialogue within the group is required in order to articulate, prioritise and act upon shared concerns. Donati (2011, p. xvi) argues, furthermore, that social relations ‘reflect the performance of an emergent reality between two or more people, groups and even institutions when they act as social subjects.’ He suggests that a relation orients the reflexivity of the subjects involved, as they take into account ways that the relation influences their situation. The deliberation within the group bends back upon the group’s own activity, with Donati (2011, p. 17) referring to it as ‘we-reflexivity’; although we would prefer the term ‘co-reflexive’.

It is helpful to draw attention specifically to the way in which the individual and mutual aims in view orient the reflexivity of those involved. For Thévenot (2001), the term ‘engagement’ adverts to the connection between an intervention on the part of an agent in pursuit of some good and the response that the agent meets from reality. He identifies regimes of familiarity that involve the pursuit of goods centred on personal and local convenience, and regimes of justification for which the goods at stake centre on collective conventions. Thévenot (2001, p. 6) argues further: ‘This has led to the strange situation in which most sociologists, while deeply concerned with political and moral issues (sometimes overtly, sometimes not), generally offer accounts of the social world which poorly acknowledge actors’ preoccupation with the good.’ There is scope, equally, for students to pursue varied sets of goods in an educational context. These include those cultural goods that are implicated in developing understanding or capacity, as well as those goods that pertain to relations with others. Indeed, substantial relations with peers, tutors and others may provide an essential means of support to deal with the challenges inherent in pursuit of cultural goods.

Characterising variation in the student response

Archer (2003) suggests that the prioritisation of different sets of concerns alongside experiences of social continuity or discontinuity can lead one to adopt a distinctive mode of reflexivity. More specifically, Archer argues that some individuals characteristically engage in deliberations that remain private to themselves, as a means to prioritise performance in relation to one’s employment. She terms this autonomous reflexivity, highlighting how it is associated with socio-economic mobility. Meanwhile, meta-reflexivity involves prioritising social ideals in the face of social discontinuity, with the associated need to monitor of one’s own reflexive deliberations. Communicative reflexivity is characterised by an individual sharing their internal deliberations with others before progressing any action; it relies on the availability of stable and intimate conversational partners. Finally, fractured reflexivity occurs where internal deliberation results in personal distress rather than constructive action. While one mode of deliberation may be seen to predominate for any given individual, in principle any individual will able to operate across all of these respective modes. Archer argues that such distinctive modes of reflexivity influence the way in which agency is exercised. How might distinctive modes of reflexivity specifically mediate the exercise of agency in educational settings? In exploring this territory in the remainder of this paper, we see scope for a rich account of differences in the ways that students engage in their learning.

Taking responsibility: extended reflexivity

When given responsibility to progress a learning project in the face of uncertainty, one immediate response will be for a student to deliberate upon cognitive processes and behaviours that could be employed in order to progress the project. For example, the project may involve the exercise of various non-reflexive cognitive processes or behaviours. These may already have been mastered by the student or could be mastered as separate sub-tasks. In general terms the exercise of regulatory strategies, though, depends upon the student prioritising the learning project in relation to other activity. Pintrich and Zusho
Some learning projects, though, particularly encourage students to engage in reflexive deliberations on an extended basis. Activities tied to authentic contexts promote more extended patterns of self-regulation, as Vermetten et al (2002, p. 273) argues. It is clear that high impact practices make it hard for students to avoid taking responsibility for their learning in the face of uncertainty, as with study abroad or engaging in research; and also that substantive social relations are often incorporated as an integral element of a high impact practice. Black and Wiliam (2009, p. 10) highlight the way that formative assessment provides opportunities to establish and capitalise upon moments of contingency, so that clear evidence is provided that can assist with the regulation of learning and extend deliberation. Learning may introduce conflicts in relation to one’s concerns that are not amenable for a straightforward resolution. Zaslavsky (2005), for instance, considers ways to introduce forms of incongruity such as competing claims, unknown path or questionable conclusion, and non-readily verifiable outcomes. Students can also specifically be required to engage in deliberative activity, as when providing a commentary on the strategies one employed in order to solve a problem or when engaging in personal and academic development planning. The review by Kahn et al (2008) highlights a range of strategies that have been employed to extend reflexive processes in relation to various forms of professional practice, including the role of the role of the facilitator in provoking discussion, the use of prompt questions, portfolios, mentoring and the inclusion of additional parties to a communal learning project. The unique demands of a learning task thus influence the reflexivity conducted alongside it, similarly to the way that Donati (2011) sees social relations framing the reflexivity of the subjects to that relation.

Finally, deliberation may be extended in a range of different directions, and this may occur at least in part on the basis of any dominant mode of reflexivity adopted by the student. There may be ways in which students who favour communicative reflexivity are more included to extend a joint process of deliberation to take into account wider social concerns. This may affect their response to learning.
environments that have prioritised co-reflexivity, as with the way that someone responds to undertaking a group role. Some students may be more inclined than others to give time to considering the implications of any incongruities that are present with respect to a learning task, especially those who have already begun to exercise meta-reflexivity. Each incongruity, as with each new context, may present someone with a new set of issues to address, with the potential to trigger further cycles of deliberation. Barnett (2004, p. 249) argues that many of the challenges and uncertainties of the present world can never be directly resolved, in that attempts to address them result in ‘a multiplication of incompatible differences of interpretation’. One would expect to see widespread exercise of meta-reflexivity in a fully-developed knowledge society. There will, though, be particular challenges in relation to its extended nature when seeking to establish deliberation on the basis of either autonomous reflexivity or fractured reflexivity.

**Evading learning: restricted reflexivity**

A learner may choose, though, to prioritise concerns and commitments that lie beyond the required learning projects, as we have already seen with performance-oriented stances towards learning. Vermetten et al (2002) found evidence to characterise a set of learners as inactive, given their tendency to exhibit lows levels of self-directed learning strategies. Fewer regulatory strategies are also likely to be required where a task is perceived to be straightforward, with Nicholls, Cheung, Lauer and Patashnick (1989) characterising ‘feeling successful when a task is easy’ as work avoidance. If a student wishes to complete a given educational programme some form of learner activity will usually be required, but strategies may be possible that minimise the need for deliberation; as with formulaic or habitual responses. There are thus ways in which both reflexivity and co-reflexivity in relation to learning will be restricted, although there is no reason to assume here that students are not able or ready to engage in more extended forms of deliberation in other settings.

Habits may be seen as behaviours that require little or no conscious thought, with cues in a familiar context triggering an automatic response (Lally, Van Jaarsveld, Potts, & Wardle, 2010). Habitual responses in principle may apply to learning, as with a student who always responds to a learning task by memorising accompanying information. But even where memorisation is used in a staple fashion, a more full-bodied habitual response need not be in evidence. Biggs (1998), for instance, argues that repetitive learning strategies form a part of the cultural backdrop in Confucian heritage cultures, and that this does not prevent learners from approaching their studies with an intention to make wider sense of the specific content in hand. Habitual responses are, though, more likely to come to the fore where a practical skill is entailed, as Archer (2012, p. 57) argues, rather than apply evenly to learning across the board. Marton and Säljö (1976, p. 124) further suggest that learning can become ‘technified’ when task demands become predictable. They note that learning under these circumstances runs the risk of being reduced to a search for knowledge expected on the test. Vermetten et al (2002, p. 278) found that the ‘surface learners’ in their study acted upon instructional directions more frequently than both the deep learners and inactive learners, displaying difficulty with self-regulation. Indeed, it is quite possible also for a tutor to close down deliberation on the part of a student or a group of students, through indicating a single way forward. This can apply even in cases where in principle a task is open-ended, as in cases where a supervisor directs the lines of enquiry that are to be followed during a student research project. Fellow students can similarly direct each other to carry out a particular course of action. Scope for reflexivity is restricted when one applies a routinised or pre-determined approach to undertaking a learning project, as may occur in highly-regulated social contexts. We see here a formulaic engagement with a learning project, as the task demands are simplified. As such this represents a form of evasive action in relation to learning. Archer (2012, p. 34) suggests that autonomous reflexivity flourishes in contexts which entail relative predictability, given the way that such reflexivity involves an instrumental rationality in which one calculates the relative advantages and disadvantages of different courses of action. She specifically saw evasive engagement amongst students for whom communicative and autonomous reflexivity was seen to predominate, with academic study primarily seen as a mean to gain credentials or as an opening onto a highly-paid career (2012, pp. 222–23).
Clearly, though, it will not always be easy to apply a habitual or formulaic response in a novel context. For instance, it may not be obvious what to memorise in relation to a substantively open-ended task. If a learning environment requires one to take projects forward with imagination in the face of uncertainty, then formulaic approaches to pursuing a project are likely to be of limited value. We can see why Archer further argues that practices grounded in habit provide a relatively weak basis from which to exercise agency in the uncertain settings that are typical of the modern world (2012, p. 62). While it may be helpful to focus on the way in which dispositions affect agency in varied contexts, as through the tendency to display a dominant mode of reflexivity, Archer argues forcefully that dispositions do not lead individuals to adopt to courses of action in a pre-reflexive manner. While learning in past societies may have benefited from students adopting formulaic or habitual approaches to mastering clear cut forms of understanding, this is increasingly less effective in a knowledge society. The emergence of societies based on knowledge has significant implications for learning. In his account of the learning that is required for an unknown future Barnett (2004, p. 258) prioritises dispositions above understanding. In order to flourish in a radically unknowable world, the exercise of reflexivity becomes an essential underpinning capacity. If scope for forms of action rooted in habit is scaling down across society at large, then it will be harder to sustain forms of education that are grounded in such a mode. The conditions for student engagement are thus established in part at the level of an entire society.

Alienation as an alternative: fractured reflexivity

The need to assume responsibility for progressing a task in the face of uncertainty may provide a particular challenge for some students. Boekaerts and Martens (2006) argue that it is difficult to tell how students will respond to ill-structured and authentic tasks for which they are given autonomy. A student may become overwhelmed by the uncertainty associated with the progress of their learning project, whether because of the complexity of the capacity to be mastered or as a result of the pedagogic process. It is clearly possible that some students will respond with fractured reflexivity, failing to find a constructive way forward at all. Archer argues that reflexive deliberation provides those for whom fractured reflexivity predominates with little or no guidance about how to progress a project (2003, p. 299). The personal distress associated with fractured reflexivity provides one immediate route to student drop out and failure. The student’s perception is particularly important here, whether or not the learning task would actually prove intractable or not on further attempts, as both (Vermetten et al., 2002) and Entwistle (1991) similarly argue. Scovel (1978) earlier drew a distinction between forms of anxiety that are facilitating or debilitating. Facilitating anxiety motivates the learner to “fight” the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approach behaviour. Debilitating anxiety, in contrast, motivates the learner to “flee” from the learning project; leading the student to adopt avoidance behaviour. Incongruities or challenges can be perceived as intractable, with the student unable to frame appropriate sub-tasks that might progress their project.

There is, furthermore, scope for students to respond differentially to the demands placed on them by learning as it occurs in an essentially communal settings. The transition to university represents for many students a first departure from their natal context, and this is especially so for students entering higher education from non-traditional backgrounds as Jary (2008) argues. Mann (2001) highlights how students as outsiders can feel unable to give expression to their own desires, unsure as to what contribution they themselves can make. Archer (2003, p. 311) identifies the ‘deprivation of dialogical partners whose experiences were anchored in the same continuous context’ as one trigger for fractured reflexivity. Communal learning projects can also open up scope for further uncertainty, as to how others will respond or how one might be able to progress a project that is beyond one’s immediate control. Individuals may be used to concluding their deliberations on their own, without allowing any space for contributions from others, but co-reflexivity constitutes an essential element of the organisation needed to effect corporate agency. It should not be surprising that group work is made more challenging in the absence of pre-existing relations between the members. Pauli (2008) highlights the frustrations that stem from an absence of commitment to the group and divisions within groups. A group project, for instance,
will require students to coordinate a set of actions in order to produce a common output. In this case exclusion from the deliberative process within the group or awareness of animosity from others has particular scope to trigger a fractured response.

Conclusions

We have suggested that taking responsibility for a learning project in the face of uncertainty allows for a range of deliberative responses from students. There is scope for a student to adopt extended reflexivity as they seek to progress a learning project on its own terms. Alternatively, students may respond with restricted reflexivity, whether based around formulaic or habitual stances towards their learning, or with a fractured form of reflexivity that does not offer support in progressing intentional courses of action. Our account suggests that a distributed form of agency is in operation, whereby individual and communal dimensions are intertwined with each other in relation to the projects pursued by students. It is possible to see a learning environment as an arena for the exercise of both reflexivity and co-reflexivity. Scope is thus present for a range of engaged or alienated responses on the part of the student, although we have argued also that learning in a knowledge society favours modes of reflexivity that enable one to deal with uncertainty on its own terms, as through the exercise of meta-reflexivity and through forms of reflexivity that are grounded in mutual concerns.

The forms of reflexivity outlined in this paper complement those identified by Archer (2003), highlighting the role played by social relations in learning and how deliberation is affected by the extent to which learning is prioritised in relation to other projects. In this reading, a learning environment is defined in the first instance by the learning projects and social relations that are entailed, framing as these do the (nonetheless varied) responses of students. A learning environment that encourages students to take responsibility in the face of uncertainty and that integrates supportive social relations offers an immediate basis for the forms of reflexivity that promote learning, especially in societies that are based around the production and use of knowledge. There are consequences here for the identity of the learner, as Archer would suggest that a shift in one’s configuration of concerns and commitments essentially represents a shift in identity (2000, p. 241). Scope for transformation on the part of the learner is an inherent possibility for learning. Indeed, the extent to which one prioritises deliberation within learning constitutes an important element of this identity.

It will be important to consider how different learning environments play out in relation to the characteristics that we have identified. In this way we see scope to explain why certain practices are more effective than others in engaging students, as with those practices that have been termed ‘high impact’. Such insight is essential if we are to develop further practices that have a positive impact on student engagement. Or take the territory emerging in relation to Open Educational Resources and Massive Online Courses (Kop, 2011; Raven, 2003). There is a clear need to identify appropriate tasks and to help students deal with the uncertainty in the absence of a tutor. In what ways do such courses and resources frame learning projects for students? In our account learning emerges as inherently challenging for the student, something teachers can forget from their vantage point as experts. Meyer and Land (2006, p. 199) highlight the difficulties that those who have already mastered a body of troublesome knowledge face when trying to understand the vantage points of students in relation to that knowledge.

In this it will be important to employ a broad conception of the goods that students are able to pursue in relation to their studies, and that provide a basis for their engagement. There is particular scope here to pay greater attention to the relational goods that underpin education. There will be ways in which social relations can be inserted more directly into the pursuit of learning projects, as peer-peer, professional-client, employer-employee, expert-novice, volunteer-recipient and other relations. Intensive forms of education offer good scope for social relations, whereby proximity to others is enhanced through residential arrangements, cohesiveness of student cohorts or through use of technology. The basis on which different elements of the student experience are organised will further have an impact on student engagement, as in cases where accommodation or administration is ordered to maximise the delivery of
an efficient (individualised) customer service rather than to establish social relations. Employment that is un-related to studies may similarly restrict the scope to develop social relations that are relevant to the learning environment. Our argument offers a clear perspective on why student engagement might be enhanced by interactions across a wider setting, as Baron and Corbin (2012) suggest. It is interesting that Donati (2012) proposes a wider integration of social relations into society as a counter-balance to the dominance of market and state. If students are to engage in their studies, then we need to find additional ways to strengthen a more widespread presence of social relations in higher education. It may furthermore be the case that students become less willing to tolerate uncertainty as an integral aspect of their learning when their studies are predicated on substantive financial contributions. We see here ways in which the market and the state may effectively combine together to attenuate student engagement.

Education needs to be grounded in ways that reach beyond technical reasoning. The quality of the social relations involved could become as much a focus for planning and organisation as any attempt to specific in advance the intended outcomes for student learning. Donati suggests that social relations may be configured with either human or non-human qualities, in which the human is ‘that which is distinctive of the human being’ (2011, p. 20). Human qualities are evident where the subjects are reciprocally oriented to one another in a relation, while non-human qualities are present when the sense given to an action is merely functional. He identifies the potential for a distancing of what is human from what is social, and we, in turn, can say that there is similar scope to distance what is human from what is educational. Our conception of the human person has significant scope to affect education. A student’s relation with a learning project, and with peers or tutors associated with that project, becomes less ‘human’ when conducted on a formulaic basis, in the absence of social relations or when it becomes a focus for debilitating anxiety. Elliott (2000) argues that any discussion of educational goods must be accompanied by a concern for the moral and intellectual dispositions needed on the part of those involved for the pursuit of those goods. The exercise of virtue plays a direct role in education where social relations come to the fore, given that virtue helps to sustain those relations as MacIntyre (1981) contends.

Our account primarily constitutes a theoretical argument, but we have nonetheless been able to integrate perspectives from a wide range of studies. Further research will be required in order to explore the extent to which the perspectives outlined in this paper pertain in varied contexts. We would, though, suggest that an emphasis on the (co-)reflexivity of students is essential if we are characterise the variety that takes places in the student experience of learning, and to offer learning projects and social relations that take this into account. The way that a student responds to uncertainty, responsibility and relations with others emerges as highly relevant to learning in a knowledge society. Students themselves should take centre stage as we look to develop comprehensive understandings of their engagement in learning.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to many colleagues for discussions related to this paper, including those engaged in earlier and on-going studies on related topics.

References


Kop, R. (2011) The challenges to connectivist learning on open online networks: Learning experiences during a massive open online course, *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 12(3).


Kahn, P.E.


