Academic Libraries and Engagement: A Critical Contextualization of the Library Discourse on Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the concept of engagement as it is used in the academic library literature requires greater structure and depth if the librarian community intends to appropriate and advance the usage of a phrase that resonates loudly across higher education. In reviewing the literature around engagement as well as in introducing critical perspectives from outside the library literature, this literature review and investigation demonstrates that engagement is a variously defined and used term that is both difficult to nail down but is essential to the healthy participation of an academic library in its respective community. The external perspectives introduced stem from the behavioral, psychological, and conceptual organizational approach to student engagement, whose application to academic libraries could be strengthened with a more critical grounding in the compelling terms and discourses of engagement as they are understood by those outside libraries. The framework of intellectual capital is introduced as a productive way of capturing the differing definitions and usages of the terms 'student engagement' and 'engagement'.

Introduction

Student engagement is a popular topic in higher education today and one that, according to Kuh (2009), brings clarity to complicated and disparate issues and offers solutions for managing basic problems in higher education (2009). Over the past decade, the term has been used to denote institutional performance as well as to denote educational quality (Axelson & Flick, 2010; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; McCormick, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2013). The term has come to resonate with many stakeholders, including universities making it a source of competitive advantage, governments referring to institutional performance, and practitioners justifying their approaches to teaching. In its spreading usage, however, it has undergone many interpretations and come to accommodate a variety of frameworks that seek to clarify its contours. The net effect is a term that has come to embody multiple interpretations and categorizations (Vuori, 2014). This is true of the library literature on engagement where it is often employed as a desired outcome that validates whatever the project the article describes.

Given its loose usage and varying meaning, as reviewed in Part 2 of this article, readers are left with a wide range of useful but disjointed possibilities as to how libraries can engage students, above all, in learning but also in activities, practices, and programs. The literature is, however, consistent in framing student engagement as a beneficial goal libraries should pursue and is an explicit or implicit constitutive connection across the library literature. By incorporating the concepts, definitions, and insights from outside the library literature, this article brings clarity to the terms 'student engagement' and 'engagement,' providing a critical framework to better articulate the value that student engagement, as it is defined in the broader Social Sciences literature, can bring to the work of academic libraries. Student engagement can thus be viewed as an outcome of the library's efforts as well as a critical component of the library's contribution to the scholarly and cultural life of its parent institution. This paper also presents the first comprehensive review of the discursive use of the term 'student engagement' in the library literature.

Student engagement is a critical target at most institutions of higher learning in the 21st century. Its centrality to the core educational enterprise provides natural in-roads for academic libraries to align information literacy and other engagement factors with broader institutional efforts to engage students and create an engaging environment. The work of aligning library priorities requires a clearer definition of engagement as others outside libraries understand the concept. This will assist library practitioners in conceiving of their work around engagement, student learning, and information literacy as an intangible asset that the institution is broadly pursuing and that the library can assist in creating by leveraging the work it does around learning to move the institution's engagement needle.

This article is arranged in three parts: 1) a select literature review of keystone engagement literature from outside the library literature; 2) a comprehensive review of the library literature on student engagement,

and; 3) a contextualization of the library literature from part 2 in the broader engagement frameworks related in part 1. The article concludes by considering student engagement as an intangible asset that libraries assist in creating.

Part 1: Select literature review of keystone engagement literature

The ways in which students engage in their learning and the ways in which institutional characteristics support student engagement have been well studied since the 1990s. Where some researchers have focused on student behavior as a factor in engagement, others have emphasized the cognitive dimensions of engagement, motivation to engage, the transactional dimensions of engagement in learning environments, as well as institutional efforts to promote and measure student engagement. Rather than compile a dense framework that is later used to review the library literature on engagement, this article gives a close recapitulation of several prevailing frameworks on student engagement. The aim is to insert frameworks that are more compelling from outside the library profession's loose structuring of engagement. The literature on student engagement outside the academic library literature is simply too vast to relay here. Rather, the three frameworks considered here provide a sufficient landscape in which to situate library literature on engagement.

1) Kuh and the National Survey of Student Engagement – a behavior based approach

While engagement research dates to the 1980s with Alexander Astin's work on students' involvement in the college experience as proportional to their learning, it took the development of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, n.d.) at the turn of the millennium for the first robust effort to measure learning as an outcome of educational and institutional practices to emerge. With its emphasis on student behaviors that are "highly correlated with many desirable learning and personal development outcomes of college" (Kuh & Gonyea, 2003, p. 2), the NSSE has been administered at thousands of colleges since its inception in 1999 and helps institutions pinpoint behaviors such as impact practices, contact with instructors and other students, and hours spent per week on various aspects of student life. Its results have created a robust foundation for measuring not only student behavior but also institutional features such as a supportive campus environment (NSSE). By including the role that institutions play in creating engagement environments, Kuh is measuring how involved institutions are in their own students' learning. In this framework, both students and institutions are responsible for student learning. Where this model becomes muddled, however, is when student engagement is confused with the institutional characteristics that are fundamental in shaping it (Axelson & Flick, 2010). When student learning and learning environments are conflated into one term, an imprecision about who is responsible for any resulting educational failures arises: the unprepared or unmotivated student or institutional shortfallings such as ineffective pedagogy or curricula?

Thanks to the NSSE, the prevailing model of engagement that has emerged in higher education is behavior-based. The premise is straightforward: time spent studying and performing educationally relevant practices result in engagement. Kuh (2009) asserts a correlation between the amount of time students spend studying a subject with how much they know about it. He argues that the more students interact with faculty and staff on problem-solving and writing, the more skilled in managing complexity and ambiguity they become. NSSE's model, as developed and promulgated by Kuh and others, is deterministic in that it maximizes the importance of easily observed phenomenon while minimizing or obscuring other forms of engagement such as cognitive and emotional engagement. In the intervening years since the NSSE came to define engagement, others have questioned and explored forms of engagement that do not fit into the NSSE's neat equation of

measurements of behavior to outcomes. Another criticism that is often raised about this model is that it minimizes the importance of student involvement in shaping their own learning and engagement. To that end, Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) called for a richer view of how students think, feel, and behave.

2) Kahu and the psychological perspective

Kahu (2013) lays out a concise framework that expands the NSSE equation to include psychological and sociopolitical engagement as well as a holistic perspective that affords a broader view of engagement. Questioning the behavioral perspective's reliance on surveys for measurement, Kahu supports her argument by pointing out that the behavioral viewpoint applies a rigid definition of engagement across a broad spectrum of disciplines (Brint, Cantwell, & Hannemann, 2008), misses much of the situational dynamics of engagement, and obscures the participant's voice by forcing the subject's understanding of their engagement into a set of predefined questions (Bryson, Cooper, & Hand, 2010).

According to Kahu, the psychological perspective is a more complex conceptualization of engagement as a behavioral process that varies (and ideally) grows over time in intensity. Separating engagement from the internal conditions that precede its manifestation, Kahu points to cognition, emotion, and conation as overlapping dimensions that together elucidate the larger phenomenon of psychological engagement. Recognizing the value in the behavioral approach, Kahu locates cognition, or the student's investment in their own learning, (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992), in a student's self-regulation and effective use of deep learning strategies (Fredricks et al., 2004). The affective dimension originates in research that ties emotion and emotional intensity to learning (Askham, 2008). The affective dimension is varied in its complexity, with some likening engagement to attachment and belonging (Libbey, 2004) and others exploring the difference between instrumental (i.e. earning high grades) and intrinsic motivation (i.e. psychological investment in learning) (Bryson & Hand, 2008; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). Conation is the will to succeed (Corno & Mandinach, 2004; Harris, Bolander, Lebrun, Docq, & Bouvy, 2004) and is similar to the popular notion of grit as developed and popularized by Duckworth (2016).

Kahu also compiles a sociocultural understanding of engagement that is focused on the social content of the student experience. The sociocultural definition of engagement seeks to explain the alignment, or lack thereof, of an institution's culture with the groups it serves. Deeper than the affective dimension's sense of belonging, the sociocultural version of engagement is relational and locates a student's sense of identity and belonging to the world at the core of the educational enterprise (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Solomonides & Reid, 2009). This form of engagement is premised on the (re)negotiation of identity through active citizenship and engagement with the political realm. To round out the categories, Kahu proposes a fourth perspective, that of the holistic approach, that distinguishes between the process whereby an institution engages students in their learning and the outcomes that result from students' efforts (behavior), motivations (psychological), and expectations and belonging (sociopolitical).

3) Leach & Zepka – a conceptual organizer

Leach and Zepke (2011) provide a conceptual schematic that accounts for the many different factors that have been posited for student engagement. Based on the qualitative research they conducted, they assemble a conceptual organizer that classifies student engagement into six perspectives:

1. In the "motivation and agency" category, which they describe as consisting of intrinsic motivation and a desire to exercise agency, students are able to work autonomously, have relationships with