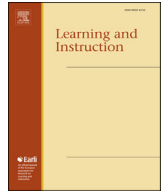




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## Commentary

## Engagement: Where to next?

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## ABSTRACT

In my commentary, I discuss the historical origins of the Fredricks et al. 3 dimensions of engagement, provide some critical assessment of the individual papers in this special issue, and lay out the argument for renewed theoretical analysis of the concept of engagement. Specifically, the importance of theoretical work related to the definitions of engagement, dimensionality questions, and origins of, and influences, on engagement are discussed.

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Let me begin by thanking the editors of this special issue for asking me to write this commentary. I enjoyed reading the several papers and the introduction very much. More than anything else, this collection illustrates the richness and depth of the construct “engagement.” Given that many of the things I could say about this construct are well covered in the papers, the introduction, and the other commentary, I will keep my commentary short, focusing my comments on the methodological and theoretical issues related to conceptualizing and measuring engagement and then relating it to other constructs in the field of educational psychology. But first, I will comment on my historical relationship with this concept.

## 1. Historically grounded musings

In the mid 90s, I was asked to chair the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Pathways through Middle Childhood. We were asked to study the psychological and social factors that influence children's academic achievement during the elementary school years. I brought together a diverse group of economists, sociologists, anthropologists, and both developmental and educational psychologists to accomplish this goal. For the first two years, we met and tried to figure out what we could most effectively study together as an interdisciplinary team. We knew we had 8–10 years of funding to focus on this topic and so took our time to get to know each others' work. Early on, the concept of engagement began to emerge in the research literature we were reviewing. We began discussing this concept as a potential unifying

theme across our various disciplines. Phyllis Blumenfeld, one of the network members, suggested that we hold a meeting specifically focused on this concept. A small group of us and James Connell met in Ann Arbor in about 1995.

We spent much of that meeting brainstorming and discussing metaphors related to the concept of engagement in order to figure out what it might actually be and how one might study it most effectively. I particularly liked the metaphor of engagement being what happens when “the rubber meets the road.” In this metaphor, the car's wheels represent the psychological components of engagement and the road represents the activity or setting in which the individual is engaged. In a sense the wheels were enacting the motivation of the individual within the context of the road. In this metaphor, engagement is assumed to be a momentary, emergent property derived from all of the ways in which a person could engage in the moment in an activity or a contextual setting. Of the papers in this set, it is most like the notion of “Flow” in the Shernoff and colleagues article.

The second major metaphor we discussed was grounded in idea of the three blind men describing an elephant. In this metaphor, the elephant represents the complexity of this abstract concept. The three blind men represent empirical scientists from different disciplines. Each blind man describes the elephant in a unique way but none are able to capture the full essence of the elephant's totality or emergent properties. The metaphor is most similar to the work in the two papers by Fredricks, Wang, and their colleagues in that they are trying to identify the various possible meanings of the concept of engagement through qualitative and quantitative descriptions, followed by factor analytic methods to try to isolate the various subcomponents. Like the three blind men, they have produced a set

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of descriptive indicators. But do these indicators capture the emergent property of engagement? This is less clear. Furthermore, it is important to realize that factor analytic approaches can only cluster the data submitted to them, data which are inherently limited by the range of items assessed and the populations selected to respond to these items.

In addition, it is not clear what one does with a set of factorially-derived measures like these. Do we enter them as separate predictors of various outcomes – looking for their unique, independent contributions to these outcomes – or do we aggregate them up into superordinate constructs that capture their synergistic, emergent properties? Do we use them as variables in variable-centered analyses or use them to identify subgroups of individuals who are engaged in different ways using person-centered analyses (as done by Salmela-Aro and her colleagues)? Do we think of engagement as a moment-to-moment, state-like construct (as seems to be done by Järvelä et al., and Shernoff et al.) or a more stable characteristic that changes only gradually over time (as seems to be done by Fredricks et al., Wang et al., and Jang et al.), or both (as is done by Salmela-Aro et al.)? The answers to these questions depend on our theoretical analysis of what engagement is, how it is formed, how it is stimulated by contextual characteristics, and how it articulates with other constructs and influences various different outcomes. This set of papers provides examples of how scholars are thinking about each of these sub-questions.

Together, these two metaphors captured our conclusion that engagement is an elusive, emergent, and multifaceted concept – one that would be difficult to measure and complex to theorize. Not surprisingly, this complexity is apparent in the set of papers included in this special issue. It is evident in the range of conceptualizations of engagement across the papers, in the various ways in which engagement is measured across the papers, and the ways in which the concept of engagement is linked to other constructs, contexts, precursors, and consequences.

But being practical, we decided to begin with a careful assessment of the current status of this concept in the empirical literature. Phyllis agreed to work with two or three of her students including Jennifer Fredricks to review all of the existing measures of engagement in order to identify the common features across these measures. This initiative led to conclusion in [Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris \(2004\)](#) that existing measures of engagement could be classified into three broad categories: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. Not surprisingly, given that the authors are psychologists and most of the existing measures had been created by educational psychologists, this classification system focused at the level of the individual. My point here is that this classification system emerged from a very grounded qualitative investigation of existing measures. The classification system did not emerge from a deep theoretical analysis of the concept of engagement. It grew out of a first, very concrete, and very-focused effort to systematize a rapidly growing research area – an effort grounded in psychology, reflecting well-accepted but not well-theorized categories.

Although these three categories are related to the distinction commonly drawn between doing, thinking, and feeling, this distinction is actually quite subtle and recent work in psychology suggests that these distinctions are quite fuzzy. Examining the items in the scales in the two papers by Fredricks, Wang, and their colleagues illustrates this fuzziness. Why, for example, is “do just enough to get by” a measure of cognitive engagement while “put effort into learning science/math” is a measure of behavioral engagement ([Wang, Fredricks, Hofkens, & Schall, this issue](#)) or why is “when the work is hard, I only study the easy parts” a measure of cognitive engagement while “I put effort into learning” is a measure of behavioral engagement ([Fredricks et al., this issue](#))? Is the distinction about behavior versus cognition or more overt,

observable behaviors versus more subtle mental behaviors; or more general versus more specific behaviors? I believe the important distinction that is trying to be made is between the behavioral manifestations of consciously controlled and easily observable or cognitively accessible constructs and the more subtle and qualitatively different types of deep thinking that goes into mastering complex cognitive material – a distinction somewhat similar to the distinction Anders Ericsson and his colleagues made between regular practice and deliberate practice ([Ericsson, Th., & Tesch-Romer, 1993](#)). Unfortunately, the second is very hard to measure because it is not easily seen and is often not even easily accessible to description by the person doing this deep level thinking or deliberate practice. Thus, even for these 2 seemingly quite basic categories, more in-depth theorizing is needed.

## 2. Where do we go now?

It is a delight for me to see how far we have come since that meeting. This collection of papers illustrates the multidimensional nature of engagement, as well as the empirical progress that has been made in studying engagement. In conjunction with the recent handbook on engagement (*Handbook of Research on Student Engagement*, edited by [Christenson, Reschly, and Wylie, 2012](#)), this collection illustrates just how rich the idea of engagement is and why it is generating so much scholarship across several disciplines. It clearly overlaps with, and expands upon, concepts within several theoretical frameworks. For example, [Shernoff and his colleagues \(this issue\)](#) point out the close ties between the ideas of engagement and flow. The concept of flow provides a very integrated view of engagement that includes all three components identified by [Fredricks et al. \(2004\)](#): concentration (both cognitive and behavioral aspects of engagement), interest (both affective and cognitive aspects of engagement) and enjoyment (an affective component of engagement). They also used experiencing sampling methodologies (ESM) to assess flow in the moment, capturing the “rubber meets the road” metaphor very nicely, and linked variations in moment-to-moment flow to observed characteristics of the classroom. Similarly, Salmela-Aro and her colleagues used ESM to assess engagement but they combined it with the use of questionnaires drawn from the field of work engagement and burnout as well. They also used their measures to develop four different person-centered patterns of engagement.

[Jang, Kim, and Reeve \(this issue\)](#), embedding the idea of engagement within Self-Determination Theory, linked the perceived fit between students' needs to the students' emerging engagement and disengagement in a particular class over time. Similarly, Shernoff and his colleagues introduced a new theoretical framework, FLOW, and looked at the association of classroom characteristics with engagement. Thus, the authors of both of these papers introduced a new theoretical framework and attempted to look at engagement in a more contextualized way. Finally, Järvelä and her colleagues used a quite different methodology to look at both self-regulation and collaborative engagement simultaneously in a natural setting. The authors of each of these papers studied the link of engagement-like constructs with aspects of the context in which the engagement is occurring. Järvelä and her colleagues also extended the idea of engagement from the individual to the collective. Thus these papers illustrate very well how the range of work being done on engagement has grown over the last several years.

But as the editors point out, the popularity and seeming familiarity of engagement as a concept is a two edged sword. On the one hand, it is a construct that transcends disciplines and theoretical frameworks. On the other hand, it is like a Rorschach image in that it means many different things to many different people. Thus,

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