

Student engagement: A guarantor of student success?

Liz Thomas, leader of a large research project on student success in the UK wrote in 2012:

It has become increasingly clear that 'success' means helping all students to become more engaged and more effective learners in higher education, thus improving their academic outcomes and their progression opportunities after graduation (or when they exit higher education).

But how do we achieve student engagement and success? I think there are three short answers: (i) students' own investment in learning; (ii) the critical role of teachers; and (iii) an enabling external environment.. There are many long answers.

1. Students' own investment in learning

1.1 Student self-belief is vital for success

Students need to believe that all strengths they bring into the classroom are appreciated by e.g.

- Us recognising and demonstrating, in word and deed, that they appreciate students' strengths;
- Varying teaching and learning activities, and assessment methods so students have the opportunity to use and develop their particular strengths;
- providing feedback that enables students to recognise and develop their strengths

1.2 Students' motivation grows from self-belief

Motivation grows where

- tasks and activities enable students to feel competent – not glossing over weaknesses, but framing tasks in ways that will build on strengths;
- feedback on completed tasks is timely, specific, reinforces strengths and provides guidance on how to address weaknesses;
- group activities encourage interdependence, a sense of belonging, as well as room for an individual to work autonomously, and the collective to value individual contributions.

1.3 Self-belief and motivation grow students' social and cultural capital

- We frequently acknowledges the strengths non-traditional learners bring to learning;
- cater, at least some of the time, to attitudes, expectations, behaviours and approaches to learning valued by students from diverse cultures with diverse knowledge and skills;
- give 'non-traditional' as well as traditional students a window for sharing their ideas about what makes them similar to and different from others;
- We maintain standards, but finds new, appropriate ways for 'non-traditional' students to achieve them.

2. Teachers and institutions are vital enablers of engagement

2.1 There are many practical ways to improve engagement in the first year experience

A useful summary supporting this proposition is provided by Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles of good teaching:

- nurture positive student-teacher relationships;
- foster co-operation among students;
- promote active learning;
- provide prompt, constructive feedback on student work;
- ensure students have sufficient time to do set tasks;
- have high expectations of students;
- respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

2.2 Disciplinary knowledge engages students

- We recognize that dealing with disciplinary knowledge in a pedagogically engaging way is a vital element for a successful first year experience;

- consider the special kind of practice that needs to emerge at the intersection of discipline and pedagogy when planning for an engaging first year experience;
- investigate the value of threshold concepts which acknowledge the close link between content and learning-teaching and are “akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 1).

2.3 *Engaging teaching considers student wellbeing*

Wellbeing indicators are important in:

- helping learners develop their self esteem, resilience and positive emotions;
- enabling feelings of autonomy, competence and engagement;
- reinforcing positive relationships with students, teachers and significant others.

3. **Enabling external environments**

3.1 *Adapt to changing student expectations*

- By recognising that many students are employed. While we will dance a fine line between maintaining standards and accommodating changing expectations some flexibility should be possible around the amount of content, assessment deadlines, and attendance requirements.
- recognising that many students, particularly ‘non-traditional’ ones, have family and community responsibilities. Again content, assessment deadlines and attendance requirements may need to be negotiated;
- when negotiating items like content, assessment deadlines and attendance requirements, we must be very clear about our expectations. Engagement is not for negotiation, only the way that engagement takes place.

3.2 *Enable students to become active citizens*

For example assist students to

- make legitimate claims about knowledge in a world of uncertainty and negotiate challenges to such claims;
- act constructively in the world by identifying ethical and political issues affecting their subject;
- become aware of themselves and their potential to effect change in a world that is open, fluid and contested.

Reference

Zepke, N. (2013). Student engagement: a complex business supporting the first year experience in tertiary education. *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 4 (2), 1-14. doi: 10.5204/intjfyhe.v4i1.183.