Engaging ethnically diverse first year students. A Practice Report

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Abstract

This Practice Report focuses on selected findings from a New Zealand Teaching and Learning Research Initiative project on student engagement. It analyses data from different ethnic groups (Pakeha, Māori, Pasifika and Asian), identifying some similarities and differences in the importance each group accords two aspects of engagement relevant to the FYHE conference topics – belonging and feedback. The data suggests that these students' views align with recent research on feedback but differs from some of the importance attributed to a sense of belonging. The discussion by the participants focussed on what the presenter and participants did in their practice to enhance the engagement of students from different ethnic groups by fostering their sense of belonging and providing constructive feedback promptly, especially to those students who feel like "fish out of water" in their institution.

Introduction

Student engagement has gained currency as a proxy for quality teaching (Bryson & Hardy, 2008). However, it is understood in different ways and is "a truly complex phenomenon" (Solomonides, Reid & Petocz, 2012, p. 1). For example, Solomonides et al. trace two paradigms: a European "approaches to learning" paradigm and a North American "student engagement" one. They develop a relational model that merges the paradigms and includes five senses. The central hub comprises sense of being and sense of transformation; the outer components include a sense of being a professional; sense of discipline knowledge; and sense of engagement. Some see student engagement as having cognitive, behavioural and affective components (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004); some identify different engagement styles such as collaborative, intense, passive and independent (Coates, 2006); others explore disengagement as alienation (Mann, 2001) and inertia (Krause, 2005). In the UK student engagement is understood to be "the process whereby institutions and sector bodies make deliberate attempts to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience" (Higher Education Funding Council of England [HEFCE], 2008, cited in Trowler, 2010, p. 7). Increasingly, writers recognise that both student and institutions have a role to play in successful student engagement: "student engagement represents both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices" (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008, p. 542).

From a synthesis of literature tested with empirical data, Leach and Zepke (2011) developed a conceptual organiser for student engagement. They identified six perspectives on engagement: motivation and agency, which focuses on what the learner brings to engagement; four perspectives which focus on institutional and teacher actions that engage students: teacher/student interactions; student/student interactions; institutional support; active citizenship; and a perspective which recognises the impact on engagement of factors outside the institution: non-institutional support. Two of these perspectives are relevant to this Practice Report: motivation and agency, and teacher/student interactions.

Overview of methodology

A New Zealand Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) funded project researched the question: *How do institutional learning environments influence student engagement with learning in diverse tertiary settings?* The project was designed as multi-institutional case studies using a mixed method, quantitative dominant approach. Nine tertiary institutions participated: two universities, four institutes of technology, one wananga (a provider of education in a Māori cultural context), one private training provider and one community education provider. Data was gathered using surveys and interviews. One thousand two hundred and forty-six students, enrolled for the first time, responded to the survey and 72 follow up semi-structured interviews were conducted. Three hundred and seventy-six tertiary teachers responded to the teacher survey. The Massey University Human Ethics Committee approved the project. This Practice Report draws on data from the student survey. It uses selected items from two questions to explore responses from four ethnic groups to the topics feedback for learning, and fostering a sense

of belonging. The four groups are Pakeha (New Zealand European), Māori (New Zealand's indigenous people), Pasifika (those who trace their heritage to Pacific Island nations) and Asian students.

Selected findings

Importance of students' sense of belonging (the motivation and agency perspective on student engagement)

The questionnaire included eight items tapping into students' sense of belonging. Students' responses provided some surprising data. It seems that belonging is not as important to them as might be expected. Table 1 presents the percentage of each ethnic group who responded *very important* to the question: "How important are these to your learning this year?"

In the "all students" responses no item was *very important* to more than 39% of students; four items were *very important* to about a third of students; three items to about 20% of students; and one item, *joining in social occasions*, to only 13% of students. An analysis of ethnic group responses reveals some interesting similarities and differences. The top four ranked items for the four ethnic groups are the same, albeit in a different order: *feeling accepted by teachers; feeling I belong here; feeling I am valued as a person; feeling comfortable with other students.* But despite these similarities, differences emerge too – most notably in the percentage of students rating items *very important*. Belonging seems to be less

Table 1: *Importance of belonging* (Response of *very important* [%])					
Item	All students n=1246	Pakeha n=612	Māori n=218	Pasifika n=100	Asian n=179
Feeling I belong here	35*	29	45	58	37
Feeling comfortable with other students	33	27	42	45	34
Feeling accepted by teachers	39	33	47	58	41
Feeling accepted by other students	21	16	25	25	27
Feeling I am valued as a person	36	30	41	43	44
Joining in social occasions	13	10	16	18	15
Wanting to learn alongside other students	20	15	28	31	23
Talking to students with views different from my own	20	14	31	33	16

Notes:
1. One hundred students identified as 'other' and 37 did not respond. These 137 students are not included in the ethnic group data.
2. * 35% of all students responded *very important* to this item

important to Pakeha students. On all eight items the lowest percentage of *very important* responses was reported by Pakeha. In three instances, the percentage was half that of another ethnic group: *feeling I belong here* (29% Pakeha, 58% Pasifika); *wanting to learn alongside other students* (15%, 31% Pasifika); *talking to students with views different from my own* (14% Pakeha, 31% Māori, 33% Pasifika).

occasions. Pakeha tend to be more different, being similar to Asian students only and on two items: *joining in social occasions* and *talking to students with views different from my own.* Importance accorded to both these items is low (Pakeha 10%, Asian 15%; Pakeha 14%, Asian 16%).Data from another survey question are also relevant here. The question asked: "How important to your

	All students	Pakeha	Maori	Pasifika	Asian
Item	n=1246	n=612	n=218	n=100	n=179
Having my cultural background respected	36	18	58	58	50

Table 2: *Importance of having cultural background respected (*Response of *very important* [%])

In contrast, more Pasifika students report belonging as *very important* to them: on six of the eight items Pasifika reported the highest percentage of *very important* responses, with 58% saying *feeling I belong here* and *feeling accepted by teachers* were *very important.* On seven of the items, Māori reported the second highest percentage of *very important* responses with 47% identifying *feeling accepted by teachers* as *very important* to them. Asian percentages were lower (third on six of the items) and their priorities were slightly different, with 44% *feeling I am valued as a person* was *very important* to them. When responses are compared using 5% as the maximum difference, several similarities are revealed.   Māori and Pasifika are similar on *talking to students with views different from my own; feeling comfortable with other students;* and *wanting to learn alongside other students.* Māori, Pasifika and Asian students are similar on *feeling accepted by other students; feeling I am valued as a person;* and *joining in social*

learning this year is ..." *having my cultural background respected*? Again, Pakeha stand out as different.   While 58% of both Pasifika and Māori students think this is *very important* and 50% of Asian students do, only 18% of Pakeha students agreed (see Table 2).

Importance of feedback on learning (the teacher/student interactions perspective on student engagement)

These data show that feedback on learning is *very important* to students (see Table 3). The item *teachers providing feedback that improves my learning* was ranked first of 26 items on teacher and institutional actions by all ethnic groups, with between 71% and 75% of students rating it *very important* to their learning – a strong consensus.   *Teachers providing prompt feedback* was ranked second by Pasifika (68%), Māori (58%) and Pakeha (56%) and third by Asian students (55%), who

ranked *receiving helpful guidance and advice about my study* in second place. Clearly, constructive and prompt teacher feedback was very important to these students.

assessment literature and, as teachers, we need to be thinking about how we can improve the quality and promptness of our feedback.

Table 3: *Importance of feedback on learning* (Response of *very important* [%])					
Item	All students n=1246	Pakeha n=612	Maori n=218	Pasifika n=100	Asian n=179
Teachers providing prompt feedback	57	56	58	68	55
Teachers providing feedback that improves my learning	75	74	72	71	72

Two points for discussion

What is evident from this brief overview of selected data is that there are some similarities across the four ethnic groups, particularly on feedback on their learning. There is a strong consensus that teachers' constructive feedback is really important. While prompt feedback is important, it is more important that feedback helps their learning, suggesting these students might wait a little longer to get really useful feedback. Much recent work in higher education has focused on providing prompt, quality feedback—sometimes written about as assessment **for** learning (Wiliam, 2011). For example, Nicol and McFarlane-Dick (2006) present seven principles for good feedback practice; and Sambell (2011) proposes an agenda for change, identifying ways to rethink assessment to promote learning. However, there is evidence that feedback practice in higher education is not good and more focus on making feedback effective is needed (Sambell, McDowell & Montgomery, 2013). So these students' views reflect much of the current

These students' views on belonging were not such a good fit with the literature. Although aligned with Deci and Ryan's (2000) view that autonomy and competence are more powerful motivational influences than relatedness, students in all ethnic groups reported that belonging was less important than we might expect. With the exception of Pasifika on two items, fewer than 50% see belonging as *very important* to their learning. This contrasts quite markedly with recent student engagement findings:

> In place of the received wisdom of the importance to students of choice and flexibility, is the finding that it is a sense of belonging that is critical to both retention and success. It is the human side of higher education that comes first—finding friends, feeling confident and above all, feeling a part of your course of study and the institution—that is the necessary starting point for academic success. (Thomas, 2012, p. 1)

However, there are important differences between groups, showing that we need to be mindful of the variation across (and within) ethnic groups. Paheka have much

less need to feel they belong or have their cultural background respected. Thomas (2002, p. 431), using ideas from Bourdieu, offers an explanation: the habitus of the institutions is a better fit for Pakeha students. They are "fish in water." Consequently they don't see the "water" and take their surroundings for granted. In contrast, belonging is much more important, particularly to Pasifika students, perhaps because the institutional social and academic world is unfamiliar, and they feel like "fish out of water." We need to be actively helping student from all ethnic groups to feel respected, welcomed and "fish in water" to help them towards success in their studies.

Questions for discussion by participants

- *What are we doing to ensure feedback to students is both constructive and prompt?*

- *What are we doing to foster a sense of belonging and cultural respect for students, particularly those who are "fish out of water"? How do institutions like wananga contribute to this sense of belonging for Māori, and possibly Pasifika, learners?*

- *What are we doing to ensure all students feel accepted by us as teachers?*

Responses to the discussion questions

Prompt and constructive feedback for students

Many thanks to the participants who made a number of valuable suggestions for practice in response to the questions for discussion:

- Make sure that prompt feedback is built into the design of your course, including feedback dates;

- Plan opportunities for peer assessment throughout the course;

- Understand what constructive feedback is and how to use it to foster student success. For example, constructive feedback will include comments on what the student has understood and done well; draw their attention to concepts that are not yet well understood and help them to understand them; make suggestions for what students can do next time to improve the quality of their learning and work;

- Ensure that feedback is purposefully constructive;

- Arrange for previously successful students to sit with first year students to give feedback before work is submitted;

- Encourage students to use support services to improve their writing before submitting assignments;

- Offer opportunities to comment on draft assignments;

- Use online submission and feedback processes to speed up the turnaround time for feedback;

- Draw on ideas from transition pedagogy, particularly those related the principle of assessment (Kift, 2008).

Sense of belonging and acceptance

- Be friendly and approachable; get to know students; encourage contact with you;

- Share your story of how you sometimes feel like a "fish out of water";

- Don't assume that Pakeha students will automatically feel they belong at university; some feel like "fish out of water";

- Organise students into groups that include different ethnicities. This provides opportunities for students to get to know and work with people from ethnic groups different from their own and helps build relationships;

- Learn about the cultures of students enrolled in the units/papers you teach e.g. greet students in their first language;

- Identify actions that work for individual students; don't assume that what works for one group will work for all students;

- Draw on ideas from transition pedagogy, particularly those related to the principle of diversity (Kift, 2008).

Finally, there was a suggestion that we could develop "flying fish" that are "fish in water" at least some of the time though they may still be "fish out of water" at other times. It is also about having conversations with students to reassure them that they are likely to be "flying fish" during their first year: flying at times but also experiencing times when they are in troughs.

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