Enhancing the hospitality student learning experience through student engagement: An analysis

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Abstract

Student engagement is fast becoming an important framework with which to understand educational issues and concerns such as academic performance or lack of it, absenteeism, dropout, poor class attendance and lack of participation. Without meaningful student engagement, effective learning and student success can hardly be possible. Consequently, academics and researchers in higher education institutions need to gain more understanding into the mechanisms of engaging hospitality students and the theories that underpin these mechanisms. This calls for sound research and practice driven initiatives that are meant to refresh and enhance existing hospitality student engagement-practices in higher education. This concept paper explores the essence of engagement with particular emphasis on hospitality students in universities. It seeks to stimulate an academic conversation around the concept of hospitality student engagement, its key dimensions, its rationale as well as possible strategies of engaging students. In doing this, the paper will not attempt to be prescriptive but will seek to provoke new insights and perspectives that help broaden understanding of the concept. The paper is derived from the author's more than two decades-long experience of teaching in higher education as well as current and past local and international literature and journal articles on student engagement in higher education. The study's findings established that student engagement is a pre-requisite for student success. The need to develop academics' capacity in planning and designing engaging learning environments that stimulate students' learning interest thus came to the fore.

Keywords: Engagement, learning, student, academics, higher education, South Africa.

Introduction

The question of continuously enhancing hospitality student learning and success in higher education has drawn the attention of many scholars and academic leaders in higher education (HE) locally and globally. Consequently, several research has examined various factors that influence the hospitality student success pattern ranging from academic preparation, motivation, family background and the nature and level of student engagement. Getting to understand hospitality student success factors is not necessarily easy since student success is a complex phenomenon that defies linear causal explanations as success results from the intersection of various factors both within and outside the student. A study conducted by the CHE (2016) on learning in South African universities has revealed that just as academic preparation and motivation, student engagement was another important predictor of student success. In the same vein, Shulman (2005) succinctly adds that institutions must dedicate sufficient attention to the fostering and monitoring of student engagement since hardly any meaningful learning can take place when students are not engaged. Therefore, while universities should primarily concern themselves with preparing students academically and motivating them to persist in their studies, they should also invest more time in researching dynamic ways of engaging their students particularly in Hospitality.

At the international level, several research has been conducted to determine factors that help enhance student success in HE (Tinto, 1987; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2006). Student engagement has been identified as an important driver in the student success matrix and yet many academics in HE experience onerous challenges in trying to engage their

students. This is particularly so with beginning lecturers and other early career academics who do not have sufficient grounding in pedagogical approaches. In many cases such academics rely on the teaching methods they were exposed to during their times as students. This is problematic since effective teaching requires pedagogically sound and effective facilitation of learning strategies which have the potential to stimulate student engagement. Research conducted in the USA by Kuh et al. (2006) has shown that a positive correlation exists between levels of student engagement and higher academic grades as well as improved graduation rates.

Research conducted in American higher education institutions has shown that student academic performance is positively related to the degree of their engagement and that disengagement usually give rise to poor academic performance (Tinto, 1987; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004). Student engagement has thus become an important framework with which to understand educational concerns and problems such as absenteeism, dropout, poor class attendance, lack of participation and ultimately poor academic performance.

It is therefore important that university academics develop a deeper understanding of the concept of student engagement and how they can help bring this about in their various learning ecologies in general and hospitality classes in particular. This concept paper seeks to explore the essence of student engagement, its dimensions, mechanics and centrality in student learning. The paper serves as a platform for sharing ideas on how academics can possibly foster, monitor and gauge levels of student engagement in Hospitality. "Education is a very powerful instrument for social change and transformation and innovative teaching practice is the only way to enhance the quality of our education. The problems which society faces are essentially the problems of educational institutions which are required to be innovative as they teach new skills and develop new insights and approaches towards the solving of social problems which the nation faces. Students must be empowered to be able to withstand the global challenges of the 21st century" (Nicolaides, 2012:621).

Methodology

This study adopted a theoretical approach in which secondary data on student engagement were reviewed and analyzed. The data was obtained from journal articles, search engines, conference papers and published books. According to George State University (2015), theoretical research is explanatory and seeks to advance knowledge with the help of research literature without the researcher having to directly observe the research object. This methodology was deemed appropriate for a research of this nature since the aim was to define and outline conceptual models on student engagement in higher education. Information and insight was also drawn from the researcher's more than two-decades long teaching practice in higher education. Evidences from the literature and case studies from across the world were used to shade light on the concept of student engagement particularly as it relates to hospitality students learning.

The concept of student engagement

Astin (1984:298) conceives engagement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" while Skinner and Belmont (1993:572) regard it as "sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by positive emotional tone". What sticks out from the two definitions is that student engagement has come to be associated with students' investment with learning activities. The essence of student engagement arises from the need to make students active participants in the learning process as opposed to being passive recipients and products. Shernoff (2013) conceives student engagement as the heightened, simultaneous experience of concentration, interest and enjoyment. These three components "concentration''; "interest" and "enjoyment" are useful as their presence in learning is usually associated with success. For instance, concentration is

an expression of academic performance and symbolizes deep cognitive processing while interest and enjoyment motivate students to persist in what they are learning or studying.

Engagement is not only a reflection of the choices that students make as it is also a function of institutional conditions, which include the learning opportunities and activities that the institution provides to its students and how it deploys resources and services to induce students to learn (Collaco, 2017). This view aligns with Kuh (2003) notion which regards engagement as the time and energy that students dedicate to educationally sound activities both in and outside the classroom, and the associated practices, policies and procedures that institutions use to encourage students to take part in their learning activities. In this way, student engagement can be understood as a shared responsibility between the institution and the students themselves.

An adequate conceptualization of engagement should encompass three closely interconnected dimensions namely, the behavioural, the cognitive and the relational/emotional aspects of engagement (Trowler, 2010). It is widely believed that for a student to experience success in learning, he/she must be engaged in each of the three dimensions as illustrated below.

Behavioural engagement

The representations of behavioural engagement in students include their level of participation in institutional activities, effort, persistence and compliance with the institution's structures and learning systems. Davis, Shalter-Bruening and Andrzewski (2008) elaborate on this idea by observing that a student who is behaviourally engaged attends to his/her home-work, persist on assigned tasks and completes these as required. The exertion of effort is thus an essential characteristic of a student who is behaviourally engaged. As Pintrich (2003:105) aptly expresses, behavioural engagement is a manifestation of a student effort and is therefore a measure of the quantity of the student engagement in the class or learning activity. In other words, in behavioural engagement the focus is on student effort to simply do the work at hand without necessarily understanding it or doing it well. University academics will readily recall instances where a particular student really worked very hard but still continued to struggle with learning effectively. This is a typical case where a student is behaviourally engaged but not cognitively engaged.

Cognitive engagement

According to Wentzel (2003) cognitive engagement is a reflection of the nature and extent of the student's psychological engagement with the academic task. This includes a whole lot of things and processes including the learning strategies employed by the students, their interest in learning as well as their ownership of the learning process and activities. As Trowler (2010) puts it, cognitive engagement symbolises investment in learning, depth of processing and the use of self-regulated metacognitive strategies.

It is a measure of the student's will and how they feel about themselves and their work. As Angela (2015) states, cognitive engagement relates to students' skills and the learning strategies that they employ to understand their work. If a student is not cognitively engaged, he or she may struggle to learn effectively despite the effort that he/she might put into his studies. These dimensions of engagement have great implications for the work of academics in universities and colleges. For instance, academics need to be acutely aware of the fact that if students appear to be working on their assigned tasks, which is the essence of behavioural engagement, this may not necessarily mean that they are learning productively. The need to engage students cognitively therefore becomes critical.

From the foregoing, it is clear that both behavioural engagement and cognitive engagement requires students to exert effort. However, it is important to note that in cognitive engagement while effort is necessary, it is not sufficient for student success as students still need to engage deeply, in a qualitative manner so that they grasp what they are learning. This contrasts with

behavioural engagement which is largely a quantitative measure of the engagement as manifested by students' sheer efforts to do their work (Chickering, Gamson & Pintrich, 2003:105). The implication is that as academics we need to engage our students behaviourally and cognitively so that they are able to attend to the task at hand and at the same time being able to manage and apply their minds in their learning so as to succeed.

Affective / Emotional engagement

Skinner and Belmont (1993) conceive emotional engagement as the feelings of interest, happiness, boredom, anxiety and anger that students experience while working on assigned tasks and other achievement-related activities. In other words, emotional engagement is an expression of the pleasant and unpleasant emotions that students develop as a result of their interactions and relationships with teachers, peers and the school. As Christine and Collaco (2017) express, student engagement from this perspective relates to the interest and the extent to which students like what they are learning or doing. In a way, it is a measure of the extent of student connectedness to the institution. Understanding these dimensions of engagement is critical for academics, who as facilitators of learning, are supposed to develop appropriate ways of gauging, monitoring and assessing student levels of engagement as these have a significant bearing on student learning outcomes.

The argument for engaging hospitality students in their learning

The South African higher education system is characterized by diverse students many of whom are academically under-prepared for learning, owing to inadequate high school experiences and family backgrounds. Such students find it very difficult to thrive in their studies in the absence of sound, responsive and engaging facilitation styles. Improving the complex phenomenon of student success requires that HE institutions invest more time, focus and resources on how to engage hospitality students creatively. This seems particularly important given the fact that the widening of student access to university, which has been the hall mark of post-apartheid South African higher education has not given rise to the productive, effective and successful learning of the majority of the student population (Dhunpath & Vithal, 2013).

In the same vein the CHE (2010) remarked that if the South African Higher Education system is going to produce the number and quality of graduates needed by the 21st century economy, there is urgent need to develop broader understanding of student engagement permutations and how to enhance it.

Engaging students in Hospitality and any other discipline for that matter, is a prerequisite to successful learning since it is hardly inconceivable that meaningful and sustainable learning can take place if students are disengaged and disconnected (Trowler, 2010). It is therefore crucial that academics are aware of the amalgam of practices, tendencies and conditions that tend to disengage hospitality students from their learning, resulting in either serious attrition, poor performance and low throughput. It is also important to remember that once students enroll with a particular university and are deployed to their chosen programmes, they remain meaningfully engaged so that they experience success. While student success remains a complex phenomenon which cannot simply be explained through linear approaches, several studies that seek to understand the nature of student success have underlined the importance of student engagement as an important element in the student success matrix. In this way, student engagement serves as an important lens with which HE institutions can use to conceptualize, understand and explain the issue of student success in hospitality and any other programme of learning. Therefore, consistent with Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) this paper posit that without being actively and sustainably engaged, hospitality students will not be able to devote their time to educationally purposeful activities. In this way, researching into the essence of student engagement and how to enhance it becomes an investment of immense value.

How do engaged students look like

In the broadest sense of the term engaged students are active in their learning. It is of primary importance that academics are able to determine if students are engaged and to gauge the level of engagement of students under their care. This should not be insurmountable since the issue of engagement is largely within the control of academics. In an engaging learning environment, hospitality students will display a number of characteristics. As Bryson and Hand (2007) point out, an engaged student could be seen reading critically with pen and paper to jot down, highlight and/or underline important points. This could either happen at the level of the individual or in the context of small groups.

Johnson (2012) contends that engaged hospitality students do not learn passively as they like to interact with the learning material, other students, gesturing and moving. The same author goes on to identify key attributes of an engaged student which include a propensity for problem solving, discussions, experimenting, planning and designing things. Collaco (2017) extends on this view by arguing that engaged students both in and out of the classroom are associated with the drive to explore, inquire, explain, experiment, ask and respond to questions. Engaged students are not only action oriented but are also keen to do something with the knowledge, skills and competencies they have acquired. Application of acquired knowledge is therefore a key attribute of an engaged student.

Student engagement can also find expression when students are working on different types of projects in and outside the class. The project method rests on the philosophy of pragmatism and the principle of learning by doing and thus promotes student engagement. For this to be effective, students need to be well guided in terms of the learning outcomes that they need to achieve through the projects. Learning through projects is a deeply engaging strategy that takes hospitality students beyond the walls of the classroom into the natural setting where students learn through their own efforts, realistically and experientially (CHE, 2016). In this way, students are able to solve problems through constructive and creative activities in a natural setup. This approach helps students blend theoretical knowledge that they gained from a range of literature sources, including books and internet with practical knowledge.

Student engagement should not be misconstrued as only possible in a classroom setting as students can be engaged at any place or situation where learning takes place. For instance, when students consult with others on assignment writing processes, this is an important act of engagement. One form of student engagement which is believed to promote success is tutoring. Research has shown that students who tutor others do not only gain more confidence in their level of mastery of subject matter but also acquire useful skills of dealing with questions, queries and misunderstandings from the participants

Having isolated key attributes of an engaged student, it is important to direct attention on how lecturers can foster engagement in the learning space. This, in my view, is important since effective academics should be able to act on what they see on their students and adjust their instruction so as to engage all their students. To this end, Johnson (2013) advises that the golden rule to increase student engagement is to increase student activity.

What lecturers can do to foster engagement in learning

When students enroll with the university for the first time, it should not be taken for granted that they will be able to navigate their way through their studies easily on their own. Therefore, lecturers play a crucial role in inducting and orienting the students towards understanding their courses and the institution's values, where to find resources and how they should conduct themselves throughout their association with the university in order to succeed. Further, academics, in collaboration with other support units in the university, need to develop, implement and monitor early warning systems that track the performance of students. By implementing such systems, academics are able to identify students who experience difficulties in their learning and are in need of support. Such students are then assisted by the

lecturers themselves and in some cases referred to appropriate sections within the institution where they receive the required support in time before they disengage with their studies through absenteeism, dropping out or failure (CHE, 2013).

At the core of any student engagement effort is the need to ensure that students are made active and connected with their learning. This is important as it will be absurd to imagine that meaningful learning can occur if students are relegated to mere products of the learning process over which they have no control. As Shernoff (2013) observes, the surest way to increase student engagement in the class is to increase student activity. Consequently, a sustainable way by which academics can promote student engagement across different learning ecologies and ecosystems including hospitality, is to put them in charge of their learning.

According to Doyle (2008) academics can promote and sustain student engagement by creating learner-centred environments in which students do not only become active in their learning experience but also become co-authors of learning. Lumpkin et al (2015) study on undergraduate and graduate students perceptions of the impact of in-class and out-of-class learning collaborative activities in America had telling findings. The study revealed that students valued and enjoyed participating in engaged learning activities that involve collaboration, challenge, fun and variety. Therefore, academics' ability to incorporate a variety of active learning strategies and approaches, remain central to student engagement.

In order to engage and nurture hospitality students so that they experience success, academics need to be positive and persistent in their belief that their students can always do better if given the necessary support. Further, they should communicate this confidence to the students and set high but reasonable expectations for student performance. The lecturer's ability to create and sustain learning ecologies is an important ingredient in the student engagement process. Further, the lecturer's disposition is often believed to play a significant role in influencing the students' attitude towards their learning. For instance, the lecturer's enthusiasm about a subject, the learning process and the manner in which he/she facilitates learning is key to increase the level of student engagement in hospitality.

In the learning situation, academics need to engage their students in dynamic and creative ways so as to generate and sustain their learning interest. One way would be to ask students to do something with the knowledge, skills and competencies they have acquired. This may require students to apply or relate their knowledge to different contexts and situations. During a lecture presentation, engaging students can be epitomized by breaking the lecture into pauses with learning activities for the students, for example, students could be discussing in groups on lecturer pre-selected issues related to the study area. Giving students opportunities to practice and to move during the learning session can be so engaging that students will find it difficult not to participate. When students engage in the hard work of learning, academics' role will gradually shift from that of an expert to a learning facilitator.

Student engagement should not be viewed narrowly as something that only occurs in group settings as academics can also engage students as individuals. For instance, academics can organise consultancy services with regular sessions where students can make appointments with lecturers to discuss assignments, marks, ideas and other study related matters as individuals or as small groups. In addition, online linkages could play a useful role contact can be both synchronous as well as asynchronous.

Chickering and Gamson (1987: 116) provide a framework that can be used to increase student engagement across different learning ecologies including hospitality. This framework posits that students get more engaged in their learning if the instruction:

    (a) Increases interaction between the lecturer and the students
    (b) Inspires cooperation among students
    (c) Stimulates active learning

(d) Provides timely feedback
(e) Prompts students to invest time in their assignments
(f) Communicates high expectations
(g) Promotes and accommodates diverse talents and ways of learning

Chen, Lambert and Guidry (2010) observe that academics who employ technology as a tool to mediate learning tend to experience more success in promoting student engagement. The authors found that there is a positive relationship between students who engage in web-based learning and improved learning outcomes. This view is supported by Williams and Chinn (2009) who observed through a study conducted in American higher education institutions that online assignments driven by WEB 2.0 technologies do not only increase student engagement but also contributes to the level of connectivity.

Discussion

This paper, consistent with leading research findings, has alluded to the inextricable and unequivocal link between student engagement and improved learning outcomes as measured by increased graduation and throughput rates. The centrality of student engagement to their success implies that academics and higher educational institutions should provide engaged learning to all their students on an ongoing basis. It has therefore become more legitimate and urgent that academics and higher educational institutions, dedicate sufficient attention to the fostering and monitoring of student levels of engagement more than ever before.

Bryson and Hand's (2007) observation that in any learning situation students can be classified in terms of a continuum that stretches from being engaged to disengaged, has important implications for teaching practice. This literally means that the same student can experience different levels of engagement across different learning situations, times and contexts. Consequently, academics and higher education institutions need to develop dynamic and appropriate ways of gauging, monitoring and assessing the level of student engagement as part of improving the overall student learning experience (Lumpkin et al., 2015).

Understanding student engagement requires academics to have a deep awareness of how students spend their time on learning activities and other initiatives that promote their success, as well as how institutions deploy resources and organize learning opportunities and services to induce students learn. In the South African higher education context as is the case with other Southern African higher education situations, engaging students is not always easy for academics, due to an amalgam of factors ranging from diverse and massified classes, inadequate learning resources coupled with the use of inappropriate methods of facilitating learning.

While academics should concern themselves with the need to engage students, they should also develop better understanding of the various levels or dimensions of engagement that students experience in their learning. Thus, knowing the behavioural, cognitive and emotional/relational dimensions of engagement and how these are related remains key to good teaching and ultimately student success. For instance, academics need to realise that students' mere effort to do their work, which is an expression of behavioural engagement, while necessary, may not guarantee that they will learn productively and successfully. Instead, students need to be cognitively engaged so that they are able to learn qualitatively and master their work. Sustainable engagement is also an important pre-requisite for productive learning. This calls for academics to develop capacity in planning and designing learning environments and experiences that induce a keen learning interest in the students. Students should enjoy what they are learning and thus remain intimately connected with their studies which is the essence of emotional engagement. The fact that students engage in a wide range of settings, on diverse tasks and at different levels implies that academics need to develop a deeper understanding of the essence of engagement, its various representations in the learning situation as well as how to help students become engaged learners.

Conclusion

The strong correlation between the nature and level of student engagement and their success provides sufficient impetus for academics in hospitality and higher education institutions to provide engaged learning to all their students. Academics and leaders in higher education institutions need to invest more time and attention in researching and experimenting with various strategies of engaging students. Engaging students is not always easy as it is affected by factors ranging from large class sizes, student diversity, massified classes, constraints in teaching and learning resources as well as inappropriate facilitation methods. The need for capacity development of academics and retraining therefore comes to the fore. A sound understanding of student engagement also requires one to understand the various levels at which students can be engaged in the learning situation. This therefore foregrounds the importance of the behavioural, the cognitive and the emotional levels of engagement. It is critical that academics develop a deeper understanding of how the three are connected and how they interact to bring learning success. This paper, consistent with past research, has pointed out that higher education institutions, academics, students and leaders in higher educational institutions all play varying roles in the student engagement matrix. This necessitates some form of institutional paradigm shift whereby student engagement is conceived as everyone's business at any institution of learning.

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