The Future of Student Engagement

This paper will stimulate discussion about how to respond to the changing profile of HE students, and the marketisation of HE, by challenging some of the prevailing views about student engagement, in order to contribute to the development of learning cultures which are relevant to the students of the C21st.

In debates about student engagement, the concept of ‘student as partner’ (SaP) is commonly used in opposition (and in preference) to the concept of ‘student as consumer’ (SaC), but this is a spurious distinction which, it will be argued, prevents the development of inclusive practices, and stifles innovation in learning and teaching.

Although access to HE has widened significantly, L&T practices in British art schools have not fundamentally changed in response to the increased diversity of students. And although art schools have always pioneered ‘student-centred’ learning, there are wide attainment gaps which highlight a lack of inclusive practice.

This is because widening access is often confused with widening participation, and because the art school is a ‘habitus’ through which culturally-specific values are re-produced, sustained by a number of unquestioned assumptions about ‘active learning’ which:
  - privileges some ways of learning above others
  - masks the power relations between students and staff
  - fails to value the cultural competencies and literacies which all students bring
  - fails to acknowledge the centrality of meaning-making to student practices
  - fails to appreciate the wide range of learning styles of different students
  - marginalises and alienates learners who do not conform to acceptable forms of student behaviour which are recognised as evidence of ‘active’ engagement.

It is a mistake to assume that some forms of learning are inherently more participatory than others: participation is not an effect of the medium or form (‘high’ vs ‘low’, analog vs digital), or the spaces (actual or virtual), or the types of learning activities (solitary vs communal, face-to-face vs networked) through which the learner participates – it is an effect of the practices involved.
Innovation in HE is too often understood as technology-led, and, without a more sophisticated understanding of student participation, this merely re-enforces the spurious distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ engagement. The failure to innovate is due to a failure to recognise that innovation is consumer-led. Effective leadership would promote a staff development ethos to support teaching as a creative practice, i.e. which is responsive to students’ changing expectations and aspirations.

We need to transcend the binary oppositions between SaP and SaC by recognising that students are learner-consumers, actively engaged (as all consumers are) in the transformation of their own identities, through active meaning-making practices.

The commodification of HE is often perceived as a threat to its accessibility, but access is not in itself inclusive, indeed can be just the opposite. An increasingly marketised HE landscape provides us with an opportunity to actively demonstrate our commitments to student-centredness and inclusivity by embracing the concept of ‘learner-consumer’, in order to create new learning cultures which meet the needs of C21st students.

(498 words)

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