

Alienation and engagement: development of an alternative theoretical framework for understanding student learning

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Abstract In this paper it is suggested that the themes of alienation and engagement offer a productive alternative perspective for characterising the student experience of learning in higher education, compared to current dominant perspectives such as that offered by approaches to learning and related concepts. A conceptual and historical background of the concept of alienation is presented, followed by an overview of some contemporary perspectives. Drawing on this literature, a framework is then developed for characterising student learning. It comprises three categories, referring to the alienation resulting from 1. entering the higher education community, 2. fitting into the higher education community, and 3. staying in the higher education community. Each category has an associated set of theoretical tools that can be drawn upon in analysing this aspect of the student experience.

Keywords Alienation · Engagement · Student learning · Tertiary education · Approaches to learning

Introduction

For as long as there have been formal institutions of higher education there have been concerns about the quality of student learning. For example, consider a description of the student experience from Cardinal Newman, writing in the mid-nineteenth century. He described many students as ‘earnest but ill-used persons’, who

are forced to load their minds with a score of subjects against an examination, who have too much on their hands to indulge themselves in thinking or investigation, who devour premiss and conclusion together with indiscriminate greediness, who hold whole sciences on faith, and commit demonstrations to

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memory, and who too often, as might be expected, when their period of education is passed, throw up all they have learned in disgust, having gained nothing really by their anxious labours, except perhaps the habit of application. (Newman, 1852/1964, p. 112–113)

This description is all too recognisable more than a century and a half later, but if we are to move beyond lamentable descriptions, we need a *theoretical perspective* that can help us start to understand why these poor quality learning experiences are so common. Currently, the dominant perspective in student learning research points to *approaches to learning* and related concepts (referred to hereafter in this paper as the ‘approaches to learning perspective’) as a way of understanding these situations (for a summary of key concepts in this perspective see Biggs, 2003; Ramsden, 2003).

The approaches to learning perspective can be illustrated by a tentative analysis of the above description of student learning in Newman’s time. Using the construct of approach to learning as a theoretical tool it is easy to identify many of the hallmarks of a *surface* approach to learning in Newman’s description, in particular a focus on the memorisation of content in order to pass an examination, and the absence of a focus on understanding. Further analysis using this perspective would most probably cite students’ *perceptions* of this overloaded and examination-dominated educational context as the reason why so many are seen to be adopting a surface approach. Measures for improving this situation would focus on creating learning contexts which foster and, indeed, demand the use of deep approaches, although this is well recognised not to be a straightforward challenge, as illustrated by many projects that have attempted to do just that (for an example, see Case, 2004).

It can be seen here that a theoretical perspective on student learning allows us to move beyond the realm of anecdotal descriptions, and enables theorising on the reasons for impoverished student learning experiences, which in turn suggests ways to improve this situation. However, any theoretical perspective has its limitations, particularly with regard to which aspects of the student experience are highlighted and which tend to be disregarded. Another theoretical perspective might produce a different set of reasons to explain why Newman’s students had such unsatisfactory learning experiences, and this could well be accompanied by very different ways of tackling the problem.

The approaches to learning perspective has its origins in cognitive psychology, and therefore it is hardly surprising that the theory focuses on cognitive aspects of the learning experience. A relatively small number of scholars have, however, begun to criticise the limitations of this focus (for example, Haggis, 2003; Malcolm & Zukas, 2001; Webb, 1997). In particular, it has been suggested, for example by Malcolm and Zukas (2001), that within this perspective insufficient account is taken of the learner’s social and cultural context. They argue that this theory represents the student as “an anonymous, decontextualised, degendered being whose principal distinguishing characteristics are ‘personality’, ‘learning style’ or ‘approach to learning’” (p. 38).

The limitations of the approaches to learning perspective are also illustrated in a recent longitudinal study that we conducted (Case & Gunstone, 2006). In phase 1 of this study, a small group of second year engineering students had been closely followed and interviewed as they proceeded through a core course. The approaches to learning framework, together with a related focus on metacognitive development, was used to characterize students’ learning experiences. The key finding of the study

was that although they were aware of the importance of conceptual understanding in the course, most students did not fully manage to shift towards the use of a deep approach to learning. In terms of the approach to learning perspective, we ascribed this to students' perceptions of the course environment, in particular to the time-pressured workload and assessment context. However, in phase 2 of the same study, which comprised a series of follow-up interviews with the same students two years later, it became apparent that there were some important issues that had been missed out in the phase 1 data collection and analysis which had focused so strongly on approaches to learning. Specifically, it was clear in hindsight that for a group of these students there were issues in the broader social context that had significantly hindered their learning during the second year course. These issues had been generally disclosed at the time of the phase 1 study, but the rather narrow theoretical perspective did not put these factors centre stage. Another issue that also only became clear with the broader theoretical orientation of phase 2 of the study was the strong role played by students' growing identification as engineers, or lack thereof. For some students this was an enormously positive aspect of their learning, while for others the conflicting issues related to the career were notable hindrances to their learning potential.

The attraction of the approaches to learning perspective is its simplicity and power (Entwistle, 1997), but to some degree it is precisely this positivist "appeal of the 'knowable'" and the promise of prediction and control that has recently come under question (Malcolm & Zukas, 2001, p. 35). This can be seen to be related to the positivist orientation of much of the traditional disciplinary base of psychology, which has generally attempted to model itself as a scientific enterprise. From a post-modern perspective, Webb (1997) and Haggis (2003) also question the apparent reification of approaches to learning as a 'grand' theory, as well as the supposed generic and universal nature of its claims.

If these are the limitations of the approaches to learning perspective, what then are the alternatives? The above-mentioned critiques have pointed in the direction of more sociological and sociolinguistic approaches, yet from within the educational development community there have been few suggestions on how to proceed in this regard. In fact, from a perusal of the average education development conference or journal paper it seems to be 'business as usual', with the usual mountain of papers reporting analyses of students' approaches to learning. One exception is a relatively recent paper by Mann (2001) which suggests that a focus on experiences of *alienation and engagement* could provide a broader and more contextualised view on the student learning experience. The present paper is a response to Mann's challenge to explore the possibilities of this perspective, and what is provided here is a further development of this as an alternative framework for understanding the student learning experience.

Alienation: Some historical and conceptual background

The notion of alienation refers to a *disconnection* in the context of a desired or expected relationship. This can be seen in the following Oxford English Dictionary definition of alienation, cited by Mann (2001, p. 8): "the state or experience of being isolated from a group or an activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved". Across the literature on alienation there seems to be agreement

around this basic definition. For example, Geyer (2001) also defines alienation as “a subjectively undesirable separation from something outside oneself... or even inside oneself” (p. 390). Schabracq and Cooper (2003, p. 54) refer to a “disturbance in a relationship”. By contrast, engagement can be considered to be the *presence* of such a connection or relationship. The *object* of this relationship can range from self, to others, to society and its institutions (Mehra, 1973).

Alienation emerged as a central concept in the development of social science in the twentieth century, in particular in the new discipline of sociology. This conceptual direction has been partly ascribed to a renewed interest in the work of Marx, as well as to the social problems experienced in the post-war period (Geyer, 2001). Student alienation arose as a particular focus in response to the student movement of the late 1960s. A quote from a paper published in 1973, discussing the phenomenon of student alienation, gives a sense of the concerns of that era:

[Alienation] has become a platform slogan with politicians, an empirical question with academicians, and an area of great concern for the public. In everyday discourse it is said that children are alienated from parents, youth from society and people from government.(Mehra, 1973, p.129)

Alienation also appears in the post-war psychology literature, in particular the psycho-social work of Seeman (1959, 1983), who identified the following six ‘dimensions’ of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, cultural disengagement and self-estrangement. These were used widely in both quantitative and qualitative psychological research of the student experience and still appear in more recent work, mainly in North America (for example, De Man & Devisse, 1987; Rodney & Mandzuk, 1994). Here, alienation has also remained a central explanatory concept in the literature on the experience of minority students in the USA (for example, Loo & Rolison, 1986; Smith, 1991; Suarez, Flowers, Garwood, & Szapocznik, 1997).

Contemporary perspectives on alienation

Major scholars on alienation from the post-war period have noted a relative dimming in academic interest in the concept of alienation since the 1980s (for example, Geyer, 2001; Seeman, 2001). Geyer (2001) speculates that this might be as a result of the relative calm of the immediate post-Cold War period. Should we now consider alienation to be an outdated concept? Geyer argues that alienation has taken on new forms in the post-modern world, particular with regard to conditions of increased complexity and informational overload, and that now, more than ever, alienation would serve us well as a theoretical construct for explaining the times we live in. In this section, two recent scholarly contributions on the subject of alienation, which can be considered indirect responses to this challenge from Geyer, are presented.

The first contribution comes from the recent work of two psychologists working in the area of organisational health. Schabracq and Cooper (2003) distinguish between two kinds of alienation: primary alienation, where one is aware that something is not normal, and secondary alienation, where one does not feel this even though one’s circumstances are definitely not normal. This latter form of alienation they describe as a “common final path in the second stage of a human stress process” (p. 53). A person experiencing secondary alienation simply goes through the motions and is

acting out routines with a minimum of energy expenditure. It also involves a kind of “tunnel vision” (p. 65) where awareness is restricted to a very small range of objects.

The second contribution to be considered in this section is that of Mann (2001), referred to earlier. Focusing specifically on student learning in the current context of higher education, she offers a range of theoretical perspectives that can be used to illuminate what can be an alienating experience. These seven perspectives can be formulated in terms of the explanations they give for the origins of an alienated student condition:

1. Alienation as a result of the post-modern focus on utilitarianism, functionality and competence.
2. Alienation as a result of the ways in which academic discourse constructs student identity.
3. Alienation as a result of the experience of being an ‘outsider’ in the academic world.
4. Alienation as a result of a context which requires compliancy rather than creativity.
5. Alienation as a result of disempowering assessment practices.
6. Alienation as a result of assessment practices which impose power and docility by means of examinations, learning journals, learning contracts, etc.
7. Alienation as a strategy for self-preservation, to avoid engagement with the risk-taking that learning entails.

The above perspectives from Mann form the basis of the framework which is developed in the next section of this paper, and will be discussed in more detail at that point.

An alternative framework for characterising the student learning experience

The approaches to learning perspective has had such enormous popularity with educational developers, not only due to the “recognisable reality” that it presents with regard to the student learning experience, but also because it is a relatively straightforward concept (Entwistle, 1997, p. 214). On the face of it, the notions of alienation and engagement can also seem fairly easy to work with, and it is noted how ‘engagement’ has become a recent buzz word in higher education discourse. At a most basic level, the simple definition of alienation provided early on suggests a route forward for a simple almost ‘grounded’ approach to data analysis: With alienation as a *disconnection* in the context of a desired or expected relationship, it is quite possible to first of all identify such potential relationships in the student learning experience (for example, with one’s studies, with one’s classmates, with one’s home life, etc.) and then to examine in each instance whether there is evidence of a connection (engagement) or a disconnection (alienation). I have used this approach in a recent empirical study of alienation and engagement (Case, 2007) and have noted a similar study conducted in the UK (Hand & Bryson, 2005).

However, from the elaboration of perspectives presented by Mann (2001) it is clear that there are more sophisticated theoretical tools at hand for the analysis of alienation in higher education. The problem is that although this set of perspectives is comprehensive and compelling, it is arguably difficult to apply as an analytical tool, especially for those without an extensive grounding in social sciences.

I therefore considered whether it would be possible to synthesise a manageable set of constructs from this literature in order to develop a useful alternative framework for conducting studies on student learning in higher education. As illustrated in the introduction, a theoretical perspective is a lens which gives a particular view on a social situation. The approaches to learning framework is a useful lens to work with, but the view it gives is somewhat limited. The framework to be outlined in this section is an attempt to produce a more productive yet still useable framework for conducting research on student learning. In developing such a framework it is also hoped to lift concepts such as engagement out of ‘buzz word’ status, into a more rigorous tool that can be used in research projects.

When viewed in the light of the aspects of higher education that they address, it was possible to organise Mann’s (2001) perspectives into three categories describing different domains of the student learning experience. The first category relates to students’ reasons for participating in higher education (termed ‘Entering the higher education community’), the second to students’ experiences of entry to higher education (‘Fitting into the higher education community’), and the third to power relations in assessment practices (‘Staying in the higher education community’). These three categories therefore formed the basis for the development of the framework to be presented below, which was then elaborated by drawing on other relevant perspectives in higher education.

Entering the higher education community

Two of the theoretical perspectives outlined by Mann (2001) relate to the choice to participate in higher education. In her first perspective, drawing on the work of post-modern scholars such as Lyotard, Mann (2001) views alienation as a consequence of our current socio-cultural situation with its focus on utilitarianism, functionality and competence in higher education. In this context, the reasons why many students end up with a particular course of study often have more to do with the value of the degree in the marketplace than any intrinsic interest. Furthermore, Mann cites a recent UK study which found that many students in industrialised countries do not even consider participation in higher education an active choice on their part; it is simply something they drift into.

Mann’s fourth perspective, using the psychoanalytic work of Winnicott, considers how this lack of meaningful purpose impacts on general well-being. Winnicott argued that creative (rather than compliant) living is essential for a person to feel that life is worth living. The utilitarian goals referred to above tend to work directly against this goal, with acculturation in school being towards “learning how to give up desire” (Jackson, 1968, p. 15, cited in Mann 2001).

If these perspectives seem to paint an overly structuralist picture of the process of career choice, as seen in Mann’s (2001, p. 9) characterisation of students as “going along with something that is bigger than themselves”, then Hodkinson (2004) provides a slightly different position which describes the “horizons for action” within which students exercise their agency (p. 6). Drawing on Bourdieu, he suggests that these horizons are defined by the positions, dispositions and capital that the student possesses, with some students having “wider” horizons – “a greater range of opportunities” – than others (p. 8). Social position influences both the opportunities that are open to a person, as well as what Hodkinson refers to as “their ‘ability’ to

take advantage of them” (p. 4). Bourdieu’s original work showed how it was the cultural capital of the middle classes that tended to be valued in higher education. Although Hodkinson recognises this aspect of the construction of student horizons, drawing on Bloomer’s studies of ‘studentship’, he shows how students from traditionally marginalised social classes are sometimes able to exercise agency in their choice to participate in higher education. He also points out that students from wealthy backgrounds might sometimes have rather ‘narrow’ horizons in terms of the kinds of choices that their communities might consider appropriate for them. Alienation might therefore not be related predominantly to social class.

Fitting into the higher education community

Mann’s (2001) second and third perspectives are relevant to the process of students’ entry to the new world of higher education. The second perspective, drawing on the work of Lacan, focuses on the way in which the pre-existing discourse of higher education positions students in certain ways, and constrains the ways they are able to behave. In particular, students are placed in subservient power relations to lecturers and other seniors, and race and gender have a further impact on how they are positioned in relation to other students. This is frequently a profoundly alienating and disempowering experience.

Mann’s third perspective uses ideas from existentialist literature on what it is to be an outsider or colonised individual, a “stranger in a foreign land” (Mann, 2001, p. 11). Not only do students experience alienation from the academy, but ironically many ‘non-traditional’ students also experience a degree of alienation from their own background culture, resulting in the occupation of a kind of ‘no-mans land’.

In addition to these two perspectives from Mann, there are a number of other theoretical routes that can add to our understanding of students’ entry to higher education. There are significant resonances with the well-established work by Tinto (1975, 1993, 1997), who created a model to explain student dropout from higher education. In essence, he argued that both academic and social integration are vital to student persistence. More recently, there have been critiques of this model, especially as applied to the US minority student experience. Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) show how Tinto’s linear model of an “interactional system” (Tinto, 1993, p.136) has underlying assumptions that link to an acculturation/assimilation perspective i.e. that minority students need to be absorbed into the dominant culture. They argue that this kind of model tends to locate the problem with the student rather than with the system.

Building on a similar perspective to Tinto, Kember, Lee, and Li (2001) focused on the ‘sense of belonging’ experienced by part-time students in Hong Kong universities. They found that a significant group of these students could be described as having ‘no sense of belonging’ to their classmates, to the teaching staff, to the department, and to the university. In the terms of the present framework this would be considered as an alienated condition.

In considering the potential for alienation in the domain of students’ entry to higher education, Bourdieu’s constructs again have significant explanatory potential (see, for example, Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In this theory, the higher education context is described as a ‘field’, which operates like a game according to particular rules in which players are differentially positioned (through race, class and gender)

and differently endowed with different forms of capital. In particular, it is cultural capital that counts in higher education, and as mentioned earlier, one of Bourdieu's chief contributions has been to show how this capital is in perfect alignment with the values, habits and discourses of middle class families, thus significantly disadvantaging those not from these backgrounds.

A final theoretical area that has important links to the experience of alienation is that of discourse theory and academic literacies, in which literacies are seen as social practices, and students find themselves having to negotiate often conflicting literacy practices (Lea & Street, 1998). In this framework, learning is characterised as the acquisition of a specialist discourse (Lemke, 2001), and as involving the development of new identities. Importantly, the discourses that university learning might require students to acquire will often be in conflict with more experiential discourses that students have acquired in the community. Gee (2001) has pointed out how the gain of an academic discourse always involves some personal loss; these students seem to be stranded in a no-mans land of identity which is 'no longer at ease' at home but also not fully engaged in the new environment. This resonates with Mann's third perspective mentioned above.

Staying in the higher education community

To stay in the higher education community requires of students that they meet the various course and assessment requirements. In many degree programmes this requires a heavy workload of assignments and tasks, culminating in frequently time-pressured tests and examinations. Two of Mann's perspectives deal specifically with the issue of assessment and the ways in which it can be alienating. Her fifth perspective uses Marx's original theory of alienation, in which the central concept is the alienation of workers from the means of production. Mann argues that the assessment practices in higher education are akin to a Marxist system of exchange, and are therefore similarly alienating. Four aspects of alienation are identified: 1. alienation from the products of one's labour (assignments, tasks), 2. alienation from the process of production (one's learning), 3. alienation from one's self, and 4. alienation from other human beings (classmates and lecturers).

Mann's sixth perspective draws on Foucault's work on two technologies of power, the examination and the confession, and shows how these permeate the assessment practices of higher education, and work to produce an alienated experience. The examination makes the individual visible and places them in a position of either success or failure. The confession manifests in practices such as journals and learning contracts, and although apparently innocuous, these practices are subtle ways of exerting power over students.

An additional perspective from Mann is not directly focused on assessment but deals with the broader issue of 'staying' in the higher education context, around which this third category in the framework is constructed. Mann's (2001) seventh perspective considers the ways in which students might actually choose alienation as a strategy for self-preservation, especially in the face of a higher education context which demands functionalism and compliance. To simply not engage at all might seem to the student a safe option, especially if it is a way to avoid threats to one's self. This becomes a way to avoid having to ask the difficult questions about why one is participating in higher education and what one could reasonably expect to get out of it.

Of additional relevance to this category is the work on primary and secondary alienation by Schabracq and Cooper (2003), discussed earlier. In contexts of ‘high stakes’ assessment or highly pressurised workloads, there is the possibility that some students might in fact have progressed to a state of secondary alienation, where they are simply ‘going through the motions’ with a complete lack of feeling, either positive or negative.

Discussion

Given that the framework presented in this paper is described as an ‘alternative’ theory for analysing the student learning experience, it is useful to consider the ways in which it contrasts to the approaches to learning perspective which has been the dominant theoretical perspective in this domain. At the outset of this comparison it is important to note that there are of course some similarities between these perspectives, and indeed Mann (2001) notes that the surface approach to learning can be described as “expressing an alienation from the subject and process of study itself” (p. 7). There is also an interesting link with the ‘avoider’ and ‘engager’ approaches which Yan and Kember (2004) identified in the context of student group work, and which they consider as analogous to the individual surface and deep approaches.

However, if one considers the three categories in the framework presented in this paper, then it is clear that the approaches to learning theory concentrates mainly on the last category, the domain of ‘staying in the higher education context’, i.e. the experiences of learning and assessment in particular programmes. Deep and surface approaches to learning form the basis of a theory for explaining how students’ efforts to stay or survive within the higher education community are associated with particular learning outcomes. Furthermore, the link between surface approaches, and particular forms of assessment has been repeatedly and carefully outlined (for example, Ramsden, 2003).

The approaches to learning perspective has paid somewhat less attention to the domains reflected in the first two categories of the framework, i.e. the processes of career choice and entry to higher education. Some of the early student learning research associated with the approaches to learning perspective focused on students’ reasons and goals for undertaking a particular university course. Gibbs, Morgan, and Taylor (1984) coined the term ‘educational orientation’ to describe this concept, and identified four different orientations: personal, vocational, social, and academic, each of which had an intrinsic or an extrinsic variation. For example, a vocational intrinsic orientation is associated with being interested in the career for its own sake, while a vocational extrinsic orientation is related to getting a qualification in order to be able to earn a salary. Somewhat surprisingly the classic approaches to learning perspective has very little to say about these transitions into the higher education context. Snapshots of students in courses are the common context for these studies, and even longitudinal projects have usually not tended to consider the process of entry to higher education.

A more important point of comparison however, relates to the levels of description and analysis which each theoretical perspective affords, and what is most noticeable about the alternative perspective is the very different scope it offers compared to the approaches to learning perspective. Indeed, one might be led to

wonder whether one is still talking about ‘learning’, so conditioned are we to think about learning as a purely cognitive process. A broader perspective on learning which focuses on alienation and engagement shows that a wide range of aspects of student life all have a crucial bearing on the quality of learning that they are able to experience. In short, this framework does not separate the experience of learning from the broader experience of being a student, as do many other perspectives on learning.

Significantly, a focus on alienation and engagement allows for a level of explanation which refers to the operation of power in society, and the role that education plays in the reproduction of these power relations. The approaches to learning perspective does not allow for an in-depth consideration of why students from working class backgrounds might exhibit poorer learning outcomes than others. It also does not lead to the more radical interventions that might be needed to address this situation, including issues such as solidarity, hospitality, safety, criticality, and redistribution of power, as suggested by Mann (2001).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that a focus on alienation and engagement provides a productive alternative to dominant perspectives in student learning research such as approaches to learning theory. Drawing on the literature on alienation, with a particular focus on Mann’s (2001) work, a relatively simple framework has been developed to characterise students’ experiences of learning in higher education. The framework has three categories, relating respectively to students’ reasons for participating in higher education (‘Entering the higher education community’), students’ experiences of entry to higher education (‘Fitting into the higher education community’), and their attempts to succeed in often disempowering assessment systems (‘Staying in the higher education community’).

If we wish to understand students’ experiences of alienation and engagement, this framework suggests that we need to consider the reasons why students are choosing to participate in our programmes, the experiences they have of trying to gain access to this new community, and their experiences of assessment as they attempt to succeed in the system. In each of these areas there is considerable detail that needs to be explored in order to understand these experiences, and indeed in order to suggest productive ways forward. For example, in the context of the first category relating to the choice to study, we need an empathetic and realistic approach which considers the impact of the current social context on students’ lives. With the pressures towards utilitarianism and functionalism, we need to consider what possibilities might still be open for taking a creative or meaningful approach to one’s career choice. In our teaching practice, we should be challenging the norms, and opening up spaces for students to find meaning in their chosen career paths.

In order to illustrate the potential value of this alternative approach, it is instructive to consider again the quote at the start of this paper, in which Newman described a rather poor characterisation of student learning, surprisingly recognisable 150 years later. It will be recalled that using the approaches to learning perspective led to the identification of a surface approach, and speculation about associated learning environments. Using a perspective which focuses on alienation and engagement, these students would be characterised as deeply alienated. One

would then try to understand the reasons why they came to be studying in higher education, given that on completion they tend to “throw up all they have learned in disgust”. Furthermore, it would be evident that they are alienated from the discourse of their chosen profession, in that they do things, for example, “commit demonstrations to memory”, which are quite opposite to what that community would value. Finally, right at the start of the quote we get an impression of the dominance of the examination in this context, and the “score of subjects” that need to be studied in order to pass, an indication of a disempowering assessment situation. Further analysis would of course require more data, but this brief illustration does show how a different theoretical perspective leads to a different sort of analysis, and one which appears to have much promise in suggesting ways to alleviate student learning experiences that for students and lecturers alike are often perceived as less than ideal.

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