

Does subject matter, matter? - a comparison of student engagement in culturally diverse classrooms in urban, cosmopolitan higher education institutions in the UK

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Theme of the paper

The issue of students' engagement in their learning in higher education can be seen to be at the very heart of the contemporary higher education debate in the UK. We sought to understand this engagement in the context of culturally diverse classrooms with a comparison made across two institutions with arguably similar student recruitment and generally similar learning, teaching and assessment practices. Barkley (2010) highlights that student expectations of classroom engagement have become more challenging in recent years. Tutors need to address the challenges posed by the availability of technology and different communication patterns amongst student groups. Although there is a plethora of studies on how to encourage students to become active learners and to become more involved in their learning process, the challenges presented by the 'fast technology' environment (Land, 2013) and the challenges of facilitating interaction between students from culturally diverse backgrounds (Arkoudis et al, 2013) demand practical attention and solutions.

Our intention was to explore the student engagement discourse within a culturally diverse classroom context by means of an institutional comparison of student engagement. The project used a mixed methods approach to the collection of data and the focus for this discussion is the undergraduate survey responses from each institution. Our sample size (N=393) of students was chosen from two different course types at similar London institutions. The students were studying in two different Faculties, that of business and science. This is one of the few studies that have considered the issue of internationalisation from the perspective of higher education students' engagement in their studies using items from the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) instrument combined with intercultural inventory measurement items (Deardorff, 2006). As a measure of students' engagement, the NSSE instrument has gained an increasing level of prominence

amongst educationalists in the USA. Unlike the NSS, which measures students' satisfaction, the NSSE has rarely been used in the UK context (to our knowledge) and particularly in re culturally diverse students. The survey was essentially partitioned in four factors namely, "engagement", "relationship to others", "emphasis on other academic aspects" and "the amount of reading and writing". We have looked at each of the factors.

We wanted to identify which specific items of engagement, if any, are important and consistent in students' minds in culturally diverse higher education classrooms and we tested the engagement items that are seen to be associated to specific students' profiles. The data was collected from a sample (n = 395) of students. This paper discussion focuses on the findings from the engagement items in the survey.

Context

This paper seeks to analyse through a comparative study, the way students from different cultures engage with their learning in London universities with cosmopolitan student bodies. The paper is intended to inform future practice and aid practitioners in understanding the differing dimensions to student engagement in culturally diverse classrooms and raises questions about the levels of interaction that students who are non-native speakers of English have with others. Barnett (2010) guides us in understanding how institutions need to frame their higher education offering by underling the importance of students' "will to learn", where students' active participation in their learning is part of their *becoming* a student.

Students' engagement in the classroom activity and interaction with other students underpins their learning experience and higher education pedagogy can be seen to have a symbiotic relationship with such interaction. How then to encourage that will to learn – does it differ when interaction takes place within the unfamiliar cultural frames of others? Do other perspectives and culturally different approaches to learning have an impact on students' engagement? Student achievement and success has been widely attributed to student engagement but there is increasing concern that an ever more diverse student population is linked with a number of issues associated with poor student engagement (Little et al, 2009). The research project sought to understand how students engage with their own learning and become autonomous learners in culturally diverse learning environments. The work offers some insight and comparison into the cultural interactions of students in the two higher education institutions that were the foci for this study.

The issue of culture and the higher education classroom has been highlighted as significant by those such as Trahar (2011). This 'global' dimension to the classroom is also a topical discourse in terms of the employability discourse (Watkins and Cseh, 2009). Social interactions as a key part of the learning process have also been recognised as significant (Pelletier, 2009). Socio-cultural theory views learning as the process of participating in social interactions which provide students with the tools for autonomous thinking and problem solving. Lave (1993) writes that

learning that leads to autonomy and a fuller community life cannot be seen in terms of single identifiable tools such as assigned tasks but lies in the relations among individuals – where individuals engage in a ‘will to learn’ (Barnett, 2007). The project sought to explore communication between different groups of students in relation to their engagement in the learning process.

Methodology

London Metropolitan University Faculty of Business and Law and the University of Greenwich Science Faculty were chosen as sites for this research due to ease of access. The students were in their first, second or third year of study from both schools/faculties. For the purpose of this research, an online survey was chosen and to reach the maximum number of the 5000 returns announcements were made in class and through other media such as email. For our survey, we used the four factors present in the NSSE, namely, “engage”, “relate” “emphasis” and “read/write”. A total of 21 items were used for the “engage” factor, three items for “relate”, seven items for the “emphasis” and five items for the “read/write” factor. To measure the cultural dimension, we used 16 items. The items were adapted from the NSSE instrument to reflect the UK setting. Each engagement and emphasis item was rated on the four point Likert scale 0 to 3 (0=Never and 3=Very often). The cultural items are a series of statements asking students to 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree with them. We have also collected specific data on students’ profiles and those of their immediate relations.

In addition and in order to further understand differences in student engagement between students studying in different fields at different institutions and classroom environments, observations were undertaken at both institutions across a range of different courses. Field notes were collated from these observations as well as visual data.

Differences in student engagement

The observational data evidenced clear differences in students’ engagement when experiential aspects to the teaching on a course were employed. This was witnessed in laboratory work and most evidently for those students studying forensic science, where a classroom was converted into a crime scene, with yellow danger tape and evidence of a crime left for students to find. Students were dressed as they would be for a ‘real’ crime scene and displayed high levels of engagement with the task set. (See Picture below

Generally, across both institutions classrooms were set up in a similar way for lectures and seminars with (it is assumed) eager and engaged students tending to sit at the front and others who wished to talk, Facebook, text, or use the internet at the back. The same behaviour was evident in both institutions and reflects the challenges outlined by Barkley (2010) on teaching and lecturing in the contemporary environment where access to technology can detract from classroom engagement.

Barber *et al's* (2013) assessment of one of the key challenges for universities being that 'content is ubiquitous' further underlines the challenges that institutions and tutors face in engaging their students.



Despite the abundance of literature on the internationalisation of higher education there is little understanding of how students coming from different cultural backgrounds interact with each other and how this furthers their engagement. Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive teaching as using cultural knowledge, prior experiences and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of these students.

Welikala and Watkins (2008) underline this challenge – that of the differing 'cultural scripts' that students from diverse cultures may have which affects communication in the classroom. Their research identified that students with different cultural backgrounds have different rules and norms of behaviour with regard to talking in class, for example. These differences in communication patterns were evident in observations and the findings from the NSSE survey and echo differences in communication for non-native speakers of English. This is discussed in more detail below.

Institutions with diverse populations of students, need to utilize approaches to engaging students that harness 'difference' as part of the teaching strategy in order to encourage and further engagement. The importance of understanding 'culture' in the higher education environment is echoed by Trahar (2011). Observations of laboratory work evidenced a tendency for students to work in gender and cultural groups and reinforced the findings of separation that the survey data highlighted.

The NSSE survey

The focus for the analysis in this paper has been on the engagement items relating to students' interactions with each other, illustrated in the table below, from the NSSE survey.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for Engagement Items - all students

	n	Mean (\pm SD)
E4. Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources	388	2.21 \pm 0.837
E13. Used email to communicate with a lecturer	385	2.07 \pm 0.854
E7. Worked with other student on projects during class	384	2.03 \pm 0.830
E8. Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments	388	1.95 \pm 0.904
E1. Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions	391	1.92 \pm 0.861
E12. Used an electronic medium (chat group, internet, instant messaging etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment	384	1.81 \pm 1.041
E9. Put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions	387	1.81 \pm 0.861
E10. Explained course material to one or more students	388	1.77 \pm 0.817
E2. Made a class presentation	388	1.74 \pm 0.892
E20. Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own	387	1.74 \pm 1.008
E19. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (student, family members, co-workers etc.)	386	1.70 \pm 0.887
E21. Had serious conversations with students who are different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions or personal values.	386	1.68 \pm 1.008
E17. Worked harder than you thought you could to meet a lecturer's standards or expectations	386	1.64 \pm 0.885
E3. Prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in	389	1.56 \pm 1.002
E14. Discussed grade or assignments with a lecturer	383	1.54 \pm 0.953
E5. Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments	391	1.36 \pm 0.974
E6. Come to class without completing readings assignments during class	390	1.03 \pm 0.796
E16. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class	384	0.99 \pm 0.925
E15. Talked about career plans with an academic tutor	386	0.94 \pm 0.979
E18. Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)	384	0.77 \pm 0.947
E11. Participated in a community-based project (e.g. service learning) as part of a regular course	386	0.60 \pm 0.813

This analysis of the mean of the Likert scale responses from the above items, which ranged from 4-1, with 4 being very often and 1 being never, illustrates that “Worked on a paper or project” seems to be the item of engagement that is practiced most often by students. We were interested in seeing if there was a difference in engagement responses by gender.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Engagement Items by Gender

	Males		Females	
	n	Mean (\pm SD)	n	Mean (\pm SD)
E.1 Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions	143	2.03 \pm 0.834	247	1.85 \pm 0.870
E.2 Made a class presentation	142	1.74 \pm 0.889	245	1.74 \pm 0.895
E3. Prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in	143	1.57 \pm 0.997	245	1.55 \pm 1.005
E4. Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources	131	2.10 \pm 0.848	246	2.28 \pm 0.826
E5. Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments	143	1.33 \pm 0.970	247	1.37 \pm 0.979
E6. Come to class without completing readings assignments during class	143	1.08 \pm 0.856	246	1.00 \pm 0.761
E7. Worked with other student on projects during class	141	1.95 \pm 0.889	242	2.07 \pm 0.791
E8. Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments	141	1.88 \pm 0.906	246	1.99 \pm 0.901
E9. Put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions	140	1.76 \pm 0.845	246	1.83 \pm 0.872
E10. Explained course material to one or more students	141	1.75 \pm 1.008	246	1.78 \pm 0.803
E11. Participated in a community-based project (e.g. service learning) as part of a regular course	138	0.70 \pm 0.893	247	0.55 \pm 0.763
E12. Used an electronic medium (chat group, internet, instant messaging etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment	138	1.70 \pm 1.097	245	1.87 \pm 1.008
E13. Used email to communicate with a lecturer	139	2.04 \pm 0.928	245	2.09 \pm 0.813
E14. Discussed grades or assignments with a lecturer	138	1.57 \pm 0.916	246	1.51 \pm 0.976
E15. Talked about career plans with an academic tutor	141	1.01 \pm 1.021	244	0.91 \pm 0.953
E16. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class	140	1.05 \pm 0.947	243	0.95 \pm 0.912
E17. Worked harder than you thought you could to meet a lecturer's standards or expectations	140	1.59 \pm 0.921	245	1.67 \pm 0.865
E18. Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)	140	0.82 \pm 0.969	243	0.74 \pm 0.936
E19..Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (student, family members, co-workers etc.)	139	1.67 \pm 0.912	246	1.72 \pm 0.936
E20. Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own	140	1.74 \pm 0.999	246	1.74 \pm 1.025
E21. Had serious conversations with students different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions or personal values.	141	1.74 \pm 0.983	244	1.66 \pm 1.025

Table 2 demonstrates that there are not major differences in terms of engagement items between male and female students. An analysis of the mean of the Likert scale rating by institution demonstrated there was little difference between institutions and therefore subjects in terms of students' responses, with some exceptions.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for Engagement Items - by Institution

	Institution at which respondent studies at present			
	Greenwich		LMU	
	n	Mean (\pm SD)	n	Mean (\pm SD)
E.1 Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions	78	1.78 \pm 0.936	313	1.95 \pm 0.840
E.2 Made a class presentation	78	1.06 \pm 0.827	310	1.91 \pm 0.826
E3. Prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in	78	1.53 \pm 1.078	311	1.57 \pm 0.984
E4. Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources	78	2.19 \pm 0.927	310	2.22 \pm 0.815
E5. Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs etc.) class discussions or writing assignments	78	1.15 \pm 0.941	313	1.41 \pm 0.977
E6. Come to class without completing readings assignments during class	78	0.95 \pm 0.836	312	1.05 \pm 0.786
E7. Worked with other student on projects during class	76	1.58 \pm 0.883	308	2.14 \pm 0.779
E8. Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments	78	1.69 \pm 0.958	310	2.02 \pm 0.879
E9. Put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions	77	1.60 \pm 0.936	310	1.86 \pm 0.834
E10. Explained course material to one or more students	78	1.94 \pm 0.827	310	1.73 \pm 0.811
E11. Participated in a community-based project (e.g. service learning) as part of a regular course	78	0.65 \pm 0.803	308	0.59 \pm 0.816
E12. Used an electronic medium (chat group, internet, instant messaging etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment	78	1.86 \pm 1.003	306	1.80 \pm 1.052
E13. Used email to communicate with a lecturer	78	2.09 \pm 0.793	307	2.06 \pm 0.870
E14. Discussed grades or assignments with a lecturer	77	1.58 \pm 0.951	306	1.52 \pm 0.955
E15. Talked about career plans with an academic tutor	78	1.21 \pm 0.958	308	0.88 \pm 0.974
E16. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class	78	0.95 \pm 0.938	306	1.00 \pm 0.923
E17. Worked harder than you thought you could to meet a lecturer's standards or expectations	78	1.72 \pm 0.866	308	1.62 \pm 0.889
E18. Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)	77	0.86 \pm 0.956	307	0.75 \pm 0.946
E19. Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (student, family members, co-workers etc.)	77	1.66 \pm 0.898	309	1.71 \pm 0.886
E20. Had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own	78	1.96 \pm 0.932	309	1.68 \pm 1.027
E21. Had serious conversations with students different from you in terms of religious beliefs, political opinions or personal values.	78	1.79 \pm 0.998	308	1.66 \pm 1.011

We can see there was a difference in the mean rating for E7 and E20, with students from LMU showing a higher mean score for working with other students during class. This is surprising because of the amount of group work during practical classes but could be explained as laboratory work not being viewed as 'class' time. Observations threw some light on this as there was little group work observed in lectures and seminars at Greenwich. The other noticeable difference was E20 where students showed different mean responses in each institution. This item reflects communication with each other. Other items reflecting responses for students' communicating with each other displayed significant difference for non-native speakers of English when a Chi Squared Test was carried out. An example is provided in the table below.

Table 4 Results of the chi-squared test of engagement items

By institution where students study.

Engagement item	P-value
E1	0.136
E2	0.000
E3	0.498
E4	0.089
E5	0.227
E6	0.477
E7	0.000
E8	0.017
E9	0.039
E10	0.037
E11	0.695
E12	0.861
E13	0.598
E14	0.960
E15	0.015
E16	0.883
E17	0.821
E18	0.703
E19	0.717
E20	0.109
E21	0.683

By whether students is native speaker (or not)

Engagement item	P-value
E1	0.134
E2	0.400
E3	0.317
E4	0.530
E5	0.787
E6	0.980
E7	0.525
E8	0.198
E9	0.216
E10	0.038
E11	0.266
E12	0.754
E13	0.390
E14	0.019
E15	0.223
E16	0.448
E17	0.255
E18	0.704
E19	0.540
E20	0.001
E21	0.019

(P value <0.05 are taken to be significant and they are in bold, italic)

The results permit us to see some differences between institutions. For this trait, the Greenwich science students were more often involved in explaining course materials to others compared to business students. So are native English students compared to non-native students. Again the experiential nature of the subject, seen in the Laboratory work, required students to engage in these discussions.

Native versus non- native speakers of English

The analysis of the data showed that native English speakers are more often involved in discussing their grades or assignments with a lecturer compared to non-native students. In addition native English speakers often have serious conversations with students of another race and religion. Non-native students have significantly less serious conversation with students that are different from them (in terms of religious beliefs, political opinions or personal values) compared to native English speakers. These findings raise questions therefore about the engagement of students who are non-native speakers of English.

Other results demonstrated a difference again between subjects with regard to career plans. Clearly, science students felt that they do talk about their career plans more often compared to their business counterparts.

Conclusions

The NSSE data and the observations lead us to draw some conclusions with regard to the differing cultural background of students in these institutions as well as their engagement in the different subjects. The data reinforces that cultural scripts are important to engagement, where the findings indicated that the lack of communication with 'others' in the classroom can be regarded as significant for non-native speakers of English. The data indicates that non-native English speakers are less engaged than native speakers of English, particularly in Business subjects, despite high scoring responses for the development and acquisition of cultural competences. There was therefore more cultural engagement in business subjects but the development of cultural competences cannot be viewed as the same as communication with 'others' for non-native speakers of English. The data confirmed that students are unlikely to express their lack of understanding and that active learning raises the engagement of students. This reinforces Harper and Quayle's (2009) views that students are placed at risk of not engaging when educators are "negligent in customising engagement efforts" and suggests that educators should not encourage engagement measures that treat all students the same irrespective of background. Further work is needed to look at developing engagement tools that allow for these differences.

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