

# What future for student engagement in neo-liberal times?

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Published online: 31 July 2014  
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**Abstract** The paper first examines the context that has given student engagement a very strong profile in higher education. It identifies neo-liberalism as the driving force in the present higher education context and argues that student engagement enjoys an elective affinity with it. While neo-liberalism is dominant, student engagement will be strong. But attitudes to student engagement will vary. It examines possible futures for student engagement by discussing how three different scenarios could affect the student engagement enterprise in neo-liberal times. The paper identifies conforming, reforming and re-framing scenarios; discourses that fit comfortably with neo-liberal ideas and practice, soften them or challenge them in pursuit of greater social justice.

**Keywords** Student engagement · Futures · Neo-liberalism · Higher education · Elective affinity

## Introduction

Student engagement leaves large footprints in the higher education landscape of many developed countries today. It appears in many guises and is assigned such a variety of meanings and uses that Fredricks et al. (2004) defined it as a meta-construct; one that draws on sociological, social network, organisational, psychological, cultural, pedagogic and economic research (Kuh et al. 2006). It is portrayed as useful for measuring reflective accountability of institutions (McCormick 2009), as a guarantor of student success (Thomas 2012), as recipe for quality teaching (McCormick et al. 2013) as an indicator of individual and social wellbeing (Field 2009), as a way to transform students from consumers to co-producers of knowledge (Taylor et al. 2012), and as a means for achieving

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active student citizenship and participation (Zepke 2013). Underpinning and informing this multifaceted construct is a significant research enterprise. For example, a recent review of the research literature by Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013) identified 2,530 published articles about student engagement published between 2,000 and 2010. Even with this wealth of research Kuh (2009) suggests that there can be no single, universal definition for student engagement. However, Lawson and Lawson's (2013) view of a socio-ecological perspective on student engagement is persuasive. They consider that student engagement serves as conceptual glue that joins student learning and its ecological influences such as peers, families and communities to social systems such as higher education institutions.

Such widespread interest in student engagement does not occur in isolation. It flourishes in a supportive intellectual and ideological environment. For the last 25 years this has been provided by neo-liberalism which Finger and Asún (2001) labelled 'turbo capitalism'. Saunders (2010) argues that neo-liberal ideas have come to dominate cultural, social and political life almost everywhere in the developed world. It is based on the belief that individuals are primarily self-interested and that self-interest furthers the interests of the whole society. The best way to support self-interested individuals and society is to allocate resources through free market economics and governance. It is the role of government to ensure that the free market operates efficiently. However, neo-liberalism functions in different ways in different contexts at the geopolitical level through globalization and at the level of the individual who is expected to be work ready for the market place (Davies and Bansel 2007). This economic and technical rationality is always strongly evident in policy frameworks, but its application can vary. But neo-liberal priorities are certainly present in higher education today as Olssen and Peters (2005, p. 313) summarize:

The traditional professional culture of open intellectual enquiry and debate has been replaced with a institutional stress on performativity, as evidenced by the emergence of an emphasis on measured outputs: on strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures and academic audits.

Student engagement thrives in this climate. It seems to enjoy an *elective affinity* with neo-liberalism.

Jost et al. (2009) suggested that *elective affinities* can develop between political ideologies and the seemingly unrelated ideas of social groups such as educators in higher education. The concept owes much to Max Weber and played a major part in his linking of the Protestant ethic and the "spirit" of capitalism (McKinnon 2010). Elective affinity is Weber's shorthand for showing that there is a close relationship between two ideas. The relationship is elective because social groups seek new ideas, and new ideas in turn are attractive to sympathetic groups. Consequently the two sets of ideas interact in non-causal ways. Elective affinity gives rise to the emergence of an accommodation, a mutual acceptance. It is important to understand what might be the future of this accommodation. Hence, the article considers the question: *what is the future for student engagement in neo-liberal times?* The question is addressed in three parts. First it examines three key elective affinities between student engagement and neo-liberalism: the purpose of knowledge, performativity and accountability. Second, it outlines the method used to investigate the future of student engagement and its elective affinity with neo-liberalism. Next, it presents three different interpretative scenarios that capture different pathways for student engagement in higher education. The article concludes with a tentative forecast of the future of student engagement in neo-liberal times over the next 7 years.

## Elective affinities

Three key understandings of neo-liberalism in particular share an elective affinity with student engagement: that what is to be learnt is practical and economically useful in the market place; that learning is about performing in certain ways in order to achieve specified outcomes; and that quality is assured by measurable accountability processes. While these ideas support the argument for an elective affinity between engagement and neo-liberalism, they do not suggest that the interest in student engagement is caused by neo-liberalism.

Various features of student engagement have an affinity with neo-liberal ideas about what is important to learn and how such learning can be achieved. According to Codd (2005) learning practical knowledge, skills, and services for employment in a knowledge society are the focus of learning in neo-liberal higher education. This means, as Høstaker and Vabø (2005) observe, that knowledge ceases to be theorized and nurtured within academic disciplines and research traditions associated with a search for truth based on reason. Instead it is used to construct behaviours and competencies that are generic, instrumental and useful in the job market (Clarke 2012). This view of knowledge and learning finds echoes in student engagement (Lawson and Lawson 2013). Engaged students are more successful than disengaged learners in meeting learning outcomes and completing courses, expectations of the neo-liberal state (McCormick et al. 2013). It becomes very important to know how well students engage and what educational practices nurture such engagement. An industry has developed around measuring generic indicators of engaging practices and behaviours (Trowler 2010). The leading example is the national survey of student engagement (NSSE) in the USA. This measures ten indicators and six high impact practices for engagement (McCormick et al. 2013). Such behavioural engagement indicators connect to a neo-liberal view that higher education contributes to the development of human capital.

Ball (2004) observed that success in neo-liberalism is translated as market place performance and outcomes. Performativity, the valuing of what can be produced, observed, measured, recorded and reported, becomes a technology of control that judges and compares performances (O'Neill 2005). High performance individuals and organizations come to dominate the intellectual market place and so ensure emotional compliance to its views. These, according to Fielding (2006), can lead to authoritarian behaviours that put substantial pressures on people to perform in certain approved ways. Student engagement shows affinity with performativity. The wide spread use of quantitative indicators is one example of this affinity. The results of NSSE and its Australasian (AUSSE) cousin, for example, are used to compare the engagement of students in different institutions, departments and subject areas. Institutions are benchmarked against others and the results from one country are compared to the results of another (Coates 2007). Qualitative indicators useful in judging performance are also used. Zepke and Leach (2010), for example, produced ten indicators of engagement from a literature review, Bryson and Hand (2007) suggested five from interviews with students. These articles have been widely accessed and have the potential to normalize engagement practices. Although Solomonides et al. (2012b) identify diverse engagement frameworks, the pressure on teachers to perform on a relatively small number of indicators is considerable.

Accountability is a key neo-liberal expectation and another elective affinity with engagement. Biesta (2004) finds that as a result an 'audit culture' has emerged in higher education. According to Hagel et al. (2011) student engagement occupies an important place on the accountability agenda of higher education as a proxy for educational quality. Institutions that engage students successfully are thought to contribute to student success

more generally, such as achieving high levels of successful course completions and attaining a passport to employment with a positive attitude to lifelong learning (Yorke 2006). McCormick (2009) separates accountability into accountability that is externally required and is summative, and accountability that is reflective or formative. He suggests that institutional data on student engagement provides a suitable mechanism for reflective accountability. He argues that NSSE be employed by institutions to reflect on how effectively they engage students. The NSSE has cloned surveys in Australasia, Canada, South Africa and China. Data from these surveys can be used to improve the quality of the student experience and student outcomes (Coates and McCormick 2014). Such surveys are considered to provide valid and reliable information about the quality of educational provision (Kuh 2009). Consequently how students engage and what they, institutions and educators do to improve student engagement, and hence student success can be monitored through such survey research (Horstmanshof and Zimitat 2007).

### Futures work

The research question requires an investigation of the future of student engagement and its elective affinity with neo-liberalism. But futures work is uncertain. The future has not yet happened and forecasting a single definitive future seems problematic. At any given point, there are many possibilities. All that can be claimed without qualification is that writing about the future is about interpreting the present to explore future prospects (Bell 1998). The way this is done varies and depends on the time span and intention of the futures work. For this article a time span of seven years was chosen because short term futures work reduces the danger of unanticipated surprises that would render the work meaningless. As student engagement is a generic meta-construct with many possible applications, it is impossible to say which will thrive, which will wither. The intent then is to view more than one future of student engagement using sensitizing lenses (Blumer 1954), qualitative instruments that enable justifiable interpretations about future possibilities to be made.

The article examines three student engagement scenarios with variable affinities with neo-liberalism. These scenarios, “possibility spaces” for thinking about the future (Miller and Istance 2006) stand proxy for alternative futures. Each scenario is coherent, but not necessarily entirely discrete. It has some overlaps as possibilities can impact on more than one scenario. They draw on Barnett and Coate’s (2005) three ontological curriculum projects. The first scenario is labelled *conforming*. It aligns with their project of reproductive knowing. This focuses on what teachers and learners do in the classroom and has close affinities with neo-liberalism by focusing on quantitative knowledge packaged as generic skill sets to achieve student success and institutional accountability. The second scenario is labelled *reforming*. It is akin to Barnett and Coate’s project of acting constructively. While retaining affinity with basic neo-liberal ideas about knowledge, success and accountability, the re-forming scenario widens the scope of engagement to consider socio-ecological factors such as the importance of relationships and belonging to student success. The third scenario labelled *reframing*, has an affinity with their radical socially critical approaches to education. In this, engagement enables students to realize their potential to contest injustice through courageous knowledge acts.

### Three future scenarios for student engagement

Barnett and Coate’s (2005) work is not the only inspiration for the three scenarios. Solomonides et al. (2012a) see geographic differences in the way engagement is constructed

in the USA and the UK. They suggest that American educators tend to construct engagement as learning behaviours identified by research and turned into quantifiable and generic indicators of engagement. Engaged students in this framework are consumers of quality teaching; teachers and institutions produce the conditions that enable engagement (McCormick et al. 2013). In the UK, engagement is seen more in terms of students' emotional belonging; as a feeling that they bring valid cultural capital to their learning (Thomas 2012). Trowler (2010) operationalizes this by characterizing engaged learners as co-producers of learning in the classroom while also emphasising their involvement in structure, processes and identity building in the wider community. Conforming and reforming scenarios are sourced to these two frameworks as well as to Barnett and Coate's (2005) work. The American framework with its emphases on generic and quantifiable indicators, performativity and accountability has a strong affinity to neo-liberal ideas about higher education. While the UK framework does not divorce engagement from these ideas, it does re-form them by changing the roles of students from consumers to co-producers of learning. The former scenario is rooted more in reproductive knowing from research; the latter in constructive action. The third scenario sits apart from them by reframing engagement into a process that moves away from technical and operational considerations to pursue greater social justice.

### *A conforming scenario*

A conforming scenario for engagement is exemplified by the work of George Kuh, his predecessors, colleagues and successors at the Indiana University Centre for Post-secondary Research. The Centre has recently developed a revised version of the NSSE as a response to research and the needs of institutions (McCormick et al. 2013). In addition to most of the original items critiqued by Hagel et al. (2011) and Porter (2011), students are asked in the revised survey to respond to questions about their experiences of, for example, higher order learning, reflective and integrative learning, quantitative reasoning, collaborative learning, effective teaching practices, and supportive environment and their participation in high impact practices such as learning communities, service learning, research with staff, and study abroad. Likert style questions ask students to indicate how often or how much they have engaged with, for example, reaching conclusions based on their own analysis of numerical information, or asking another student to help them with an academic problem (McCormick et al. 2013). NSSE's underpinning design conceives of engagement as identifiable and quantifiable student, teacher and institutional behaviours. Such surveys have an affinity with neo-liberalism's vision of developing students with measurable, generic and practical knowledge and skills useful for the market place. When published, NSSE results become 'fact totems', statistics that attract considerable public attention and help gain public acceptance of the technical rationality contained in the NSSE (de Santos 2009).

One of the claims made for student engagement is that it is connected to success (Thomas 2012). In the conforming scenario success is equated to grade related performance, retention and completion. Kuh et al. (2008) found significantly positive but modest relationships between engagement and grade point averages and retention using NSSE results. Similarly, Hu and McCormick (2012) found significant differences between dis-engaged students and six quite different engagement types constructed from the NSSE survey. But it is not only student performativity that is examined via the NSSE type surveys. The revised NSSE, for example, introduces teaching related indicators that establish to what extent teachers offer explanations about course goals and requirements,

taught sessions in an organized way and provided feedback on a test or assignment (McCormick et al. 2013). Data from such items provide opportunities for professional development of lapsing teachers. Further, by analysing institutional NSSE results, institutions can identify their strengths and weaknesses. A project researching behaviours of 20 high performing universities and colleges on the NSSE established benchmarks for other institutions to aspire to. The DEEP project (Kuh et al. 2005) identified six common behaviours and values: an unshakeable focus on student learning; clearly marked pathways to student success; environments adapted for educational enrichment; an improvement-oriented institutional culture; shared responsibility for educational quality and student success; in short, a strong mission and living philosophy.

Having established that engagement and student success are linked (McCormick et al. 2013; Thomas 2012), survey research can be used to report how effective and efficient higher education institutions are in improving student outcomes. McCormick (2009) argues that NSSE and similar surveys can produce evidence about what student behaviours lead to engagement and success, standardize survey evidence to allow comparisons between institutions and units within institutions and so benchmark effective educational practice. In short, surveys like NSSE can be used to assure quality of teaching, to demonstrate accountability for the funding received by institutions from the taxpayer (Salmi 2007). According to Suspitsyna (2010) accountability measures amount to a technology of control that supports and maintains neo-liberal political rationality. The potential for engagement surveys to be used as technologies of control for accountability purposes is illustrated by McCormick et al. (2013) when they quote, admittedly somewhat tongue in cheek, an administrator suggesting that the NSSE is a test that he would like to teach to. And it is conceivable that neo-liberal governments and their agencies could use NSSE type engagement surveys as a universal technology of control. However, it is more likely, as McCormick (2009) suggests that NSSE results are used as a means for institutions to reflect on their performance and systematically attempt to improve results. If such reflective accountability is accompanied by the release of information about results, then the accountability requirement of the state could be met.

### *A reforming scenario*

The inspiration for this scenario partially originates in, but is not confined to how engagement is conceptualized in the United Kingdom. I do not want to argue here that the view of engagement in the UK is superior to that in the US. But it is different and because of this difference it changes or re-forms the engagement construct and becomes a second future possibility space. As it reforms within the current neo-liberal ideological context, it has elective affinity with its views on knowledge as skill set, performativity and accountability.

Engagement in the reforming scenario helps students to prepare for success during study and beyond. As Thomas (2012, p. 10) writes: “it has become increasingly clear that ‘success’ means helping all students to become more engaged and more effective learners in higher education, thus improving their academic outcomes and their progression opportunities after graduation (or when they exit higher education)”. Being engaged enables success to be seen as persistence and completion of tasks in academic programmes and employment. This view of engagement suggests an affinity to those aspects of neo-liberalism that acknowledge the value of learning for earning (Biesta 2005). The reforming scenario does not reject the use of generic engagement behaviours. For example, generic findings in the “What Works?” project reported by Thomas (2012) include preparing staff and students for engagement and

encouraging managers to create an engagement climate. Evidence from this research also suggests having a strong sense of belonging is particularly important for engagement. But such generic findings seem less absolute than the behavioural indicators preferred in the conforming view. A uniform approach to creating engagement is rejected as it could create pressure to conform in certain ways and so encourage disengagement. Belonging, engagement and any other behaviour, emotion or thinking are not generic; one size does not fit all. Lawson and Lawson's (Lawson and Lawson 2013, p. 461) social-ecological model of engagement suggests that it is "a multi-faceted and contingent phenomenon that often varies according to person, context, place, activity, and time".

Performativity on institutional and national surveys remains important in the reforming scenario. Here engagement employs surveys like England's National Student Survey (NSS) that measure student satisfaction and compare this internally and nationally (Little et al. 2009). The information gleaned from the NSS allows some inferences to be made about the level of engagement, but many institutions run their own dedicated engagement surveys as well to gauge the level of student engagement (Little et al. 2009). But the reforming future sees engagement in more nuanced ways. It includes practices that enable students to contribute to institutional operations by working in governance and liaison roles (Little et al. 2009). The values placed on appropriate engaged behaviours are muted; subjective feelings of belonging, relatedness and connectedness to the institution, other students and teachers are emphasised (Thomas 2012). For example, in their synthesis of nine qualitative studies, Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013) capture the view of engagement in the reforming future: engagement involves connection to a wide range of relationships; a growing into an autonomous pattern of learning; periods of disengagement and disjunction; but also growing resilience and persistence. Bryson and Hand (2007) add that engagement in this scenario is situational, dependent on time and place, while Taylor et al. (2012) offer a case study in which students are co-constructors of knowledge in a staff-student research project.

Accountability is important in the reforming scenario. National surveys, such as the NSS used in England to examine the graduating student experience, provide information to government and the public at large about the quality of teaching, assessment and feedback, academic support, organization and management and learning resources. Some questions in the NSS provide information about student engagement indirectly. Examples are: the course was intellectually stimulating; feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand; and I was able to present myself with confidence. Results of such surveys are used for benchmarking the performance of one institution against others in the full public gaze (Krause 2012). But in the reforming scenario accountability is not limited to selected generic engagement indicators. Engagement reaches beyond quality assurance to include quality enhancement (Kay et al. 2012). In their case study (Kay et al. 2012), emphasise that enhancement has its own accountability requirements around success. One of the key points of difference between the reforming and conforming scenarios is that engagement in the reforming scenario is not restricted to issues valued by neo-liberalism. Thomas (2012) emphasises the importance of feelings of belonging when engaging with learning; Kay et al. (2012) highlight that students are not customers but are co-producers of learning; Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013) found that sound personal relationships are requirements for successful learning.

### *A reframing scenario*

Conforming and reforming scenarios are imperfect reflections of each other. They have an elected affinity to neo-liberal ideas about what is to be learnt, performativity and

accountability in higher education. The third scenario reframes engagement. It breaks the connection between neo-liberalism and engagement. But because government funding and accreditation must be retained, the break is incomplete. It is often best observed at the local curriculum level. According to McMahon and Portelli (2012) engagement in the conforming and reforming scenarios is instrumental and student centred; too narrowly focused on operations and behaviours. They suggest that what is needed is a democratic-critical conception of engagement that is participatory and dialogic, leading not only to academic success but success as citizens. Barnett and Coate (2005) expand this critique by distinguishing between operational and ontological engagement. The former is aligned with neo-liberalism; the latter with a critical view of society, the exercise of student voice and citizenship in which boundaries of the formal curriculum are extended in pursuit of social justice. Barnett and Coate (2005) identify three curriculum projects in ontological engagement. The first is the project of knowing – students engage to make legitimate claims in a world of uncertainty and negotiate challenges to such claims. The second is the project of acting – students engage and act constructively in the world. The third involves students becoming aware of themselves and their potential in a world that is open, fluid, contested and in need of right actions and courageous knowledge acts.

Performativity, usually associated with neo-liberalism, can be reframed as doing the expected. Three curriculum ideas can be expected to enable engagement for social justice in higher education. The first is offered by Vandenabeele et al. (2011). They suggest that students be taught to become aware and critique the technical–rational purposes of neo-liberalism, use the creative capacities within disciplines to seek out alternative pathways and to use diverse educational spaces inside and outside the academy to converse and interact with others. The second idea, student voice, has increasingly been recognized as enhancing engagement. Taylor et al. (2012) use it to reframe learners from disengaged consumers to engaged co-producers of learning. Smyth (2012) goes further. He encourages students to learn to ‘speak back’. In the pursuit of social justice they can speak back to a lack of respect for the beliefs and practices of people not in the mainstream; to an absence of relational power that prevents achievement of collective group success; and to speak back to depleted credentials that condemn people into undervalued courses and occupations. The third idea concerns engagement through active citizenship, both inside and outside the classroom. Brookfield and Holst (2011) suggest that active citizenship enables collective engagement through individual agency. But they warn that participatory practices can also become part of a range of new technologies of control that discount the value of diversity and conflict; coherence and connectivity.

Students, teachers and institutions are just as accountable in this scenario as they are in the others. The meaning given to accountability is different though. Charlton (2002) considered accountability as having two distinct meanings, one general and the other technical. It can refer to the general (mutual) responsibility that people have for each other or to performances that can be audited. The former meaning, underpinned by democratic, egalitarian and empowering values (Charlton 2002), applies in the reframing scenario. Here students, teachers and institutions are mutually responsible for themselves and each other to engage students as critical and constructive actors in the world, able to use their voices to speak back to injustice and as active citizens supporting social justice. Smyth (2012) offers a critical democratic engagement framework that has been reframed as an accountability framework for this scenario. The framework comprises *learning*, *ideas* and *lives* as central elements, each with a number of engaging ‘must dos’. In the *learning* element education affords learners’ ownership over their learning by involving them in planning learning experiences and developing courageous habits of mind by teaching them

to develop analytic and reflective skills. The *ideas* element expects that students experience ‘talking relationships’ in spaces that usually silence them, participate in the assessment process and receive public recognition and appreciation of their strengths. The *lives* element is about active citizenship: communities of learning, social justice, active engagement and working for community change.

### Student engagement in seven years?

It has been argued that student engagement has an elective affinity with neo-liberalism. If this argument is persuasive, then an answer to the question *what future for student engagement in neo-liberal times* must consider the future of neo-liberalism. But the futures of ideologies are difficult to forecast and neo-liberalism has changed over time and may have changed again in seven years. Collier (2005) identified three stages from his reading of the neo-liberal literature. The first, proto-neoliberalism, embraced the neoliberal bedrock belief in open, competitive, unregulated markets free from all state interference. The second stage Collier refers to as rollback. It mobilized the power of the state behind marketization and deregulation. However, this stage threw up a number of problems and contradictions that introduced the third stage, a roll out of ideas and practices that attempted to engineer a third way (Giddens 2001). This kept the basic free market ideals of neo-liberalism while softening the hard edges of the rollback stage by reinventing the notion of community and social cohesion. On the back of this experience of neo-liberalism’s past mutations, it seems justifiable to conjecture that within the next seven years state steerage will have developed further; the free-market will continue to hold sway, but it will have changed with more emphasis on public–private partnerships and the idea of citizen participation and belonging gaining prominence. The three key ideological understandings supporting the scenarios will remain: what is to be learnt is practical and economically useful in the market place; learning is about performing in certain ways in order to achieve specified outcomes; and quality is assured by measurable audit processes.

In this political context all three student engagement scenarios continue to be influential. But the balance of influence on engagement theory and practice changes over the next seven years. The influence of the conforming scenario as represented by the NSSE and its cousins wanes as institutional interest declines. This has already been noted for the NSSE (Porter 2013) and the AUSSE (Australasian Survey of Student Engagement 2014). Critiques, by researchers such as Porter (2011) have undermined belief in the validity of the generic ‘fact token’ approach (de Santos 2009). Certainly the 2013 revision of NSSE still largely measures engagement behaviours but it now includes indicators of cognitive engagement such as deep learning and critical thinking and active citizenship such as participation in learning communities and co-production of knowledge with teaching staff (McCormick et al. 2013). These changes align the conforming and re-forming scenarios. Similarly, a number of the ideas in the reframing scenario are integrated into mainstream thinking about student engagement. For example, higher education programmes that encourage students to stay well, act courageously, speak back and engage in active citizenship are much more common, thus rubbing away at another boundary. Consequently in seven years the educational boundaries between the three scenarios will be weakened as a more holistic and consensual approach to engagement emerges. Such an approach to student engagement will have a continuing elective affinity with a neo-liberalism that continues to change.

**Acknowledgments** I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for their positive engagement with this work; an engagement that has resulted in a number of improvements. I would also like to thank Linda Leach for her ongoing contribution to my thinking.

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