

Confronting the commonalities between little 'e' and big 'E' (eE)ngagement

Keynote: Dr Melissa Jogie, 2018

Distinguished Guests, International Visitors, and Fellow Academics:

Engagement, as a concept, has posed a considerable challenge to understand as it sits in the dark pits of psychology where it is intertwined like DNA with motivation. Psychological studies of motivation have been around for an odd 60 to 70 years yet not been able to find a satisfactory resolve for engagement. While scholars have identified it's the big brother to engagement, no one has braved the detailing of this young spawn. Engagement proves challenging to define because it is transdisciplinary and is complexly attached to task, such that it does not necessarily carry the same definition in any two specific fields at the same time. It is difficult to capture and keep in a constant state because it is largely temporal by nature, and what is considered engaging in a fleeting moment will be in a constant flux and change, and lastly, it is difficult to share because it comes down to such a personal relationship with self that attempts to describe engagement are like running a marathon and then trying to justify how you learnt to walk. So I pose this question to my peers for consideration, why have you chosen to include engagement in your respective fields? More so, why have we gathered here to pay homage to this word?

Personally, I have spent the last year pondering engagement (for want of a better phrase - I believe this is the making of an obsession). Six months ago when I planned this conference I pitched this event to a number of people where the response was two-fold, on one hand some academics embraced the idea, for them engagement popped up in their working vocabulary, they too were encountering the term in their respective fields and found that many people were talking about engagement but did not explicitly define what it meant. For others there was this resignation, and interestingly enough, an assumption that engagement was a well-developed field of knowledge that they did not have access to. Oh how deceptive is engagement! – It commands this reverence because we use it so often and we seek to have more of it, yet no one seems to really know what it means. Therein lies a

simple answer to the question - we are here because collectively we do not know enough about engagement.

My fascination with the topic started with 'student engagement' I saw that the term was more or less a stop-cork for success – if there was engagement then things were going well. Though no one in education had really bottled the formula for 'getting to engagement'. Instead I found that engagement was more the process that encapsulated the mark of our progression, which is hinged on our ability to be competitive in different environments, which includes becoming more efficient at seeking answers, arriving at favourable outcomes and being less fearful of failures. To undertake these tasks we often need to convince others, much like the ambitions of this conference, to set collective goals in the hope that united we deliver a message of meaning and inspiration which enables others to aspire - to pattern our behaviours - and hence further their personal development. Engagement is important because it is not one thing, it is seemingly in the veins of everything. Like motivation, it existed even before we used a word to describe it, and it will continue to exist across all walks of life, for as long as humans continue to walk it.

Over the last day and a half, I've had the honour of listening to other peers present different and interesting insights into how engagement is viewed and considered across a range of disciplines. I want to take this time to thank everyone for their contribution thus far. For me, this experience feels like I've died and gone to conference heaven! Usually when I tell people I'm interested in engagement they look at me like "that's nice ... What?" So it's been such a joy to have so many people gather to talk about a common word that we all use in our different walks of academic life. It's the feeling of having a mutual friend that you didn't know you shared – in some way this experience has brought us all closer together, as common friends do.

The presentations at this conference have looked at engagement as being; attention, power, well-being, interest, motivation, assimilation, inclusion, integration. All synonyms that are used interchangeably, but is this truly embodying the meaning of engagement from a multi-dimensional perspective? Yesterday I challenged my fellow presenters to think of a synonym that their work can use in place of engagement, and I did this because often we are focusing on one or two aspects of engagement, and while there is nothing wrong with this, we want to get better at making deeper associations and connections with the meaning

of the word. I urge my fellow presenters to take on board that their presentations though inspirational, are incomplete. There is greater potential to dig even further and get more out of the essence of engagement itself.

This brings me to perhaps the most pervasive question on everyone's minds well **'What is engagement?'** Today I attempt to reveal the answer to this question. Please bear in mind that this is the closest anyone has come to providing an answer that is fit for all-purpose.

"Engagement is the quality or strength of relationships". Let's start by understanding what we mean by a relationship. It takes on the traditional sense of the meaning as being the interaction between two things that can be animate and inanimate. A relationship can be shared between two humans and more often between a human and something inanimate or abstract. This sense of understanding relationships is the foundation from which task and purpose is built. In a relationship there will be things to do, to accomplish, to achieve – it is not an inactive space. In order for there to be growth and purpose in a relationship behaviours need to be modified. It is through the modification of behaviours that we have evolution and change. If we consider going back to the dawn of civilisation you would see that any form of progression of mankind has been marked by building relationships, and subsequently altering behaviours within these, in order to bring about control, change and therefore mutual benefits.

When you interact with something or someone, you develop a mutual space of sharing and compromise which makes existence in the space bearable, sometimes these compromises are made for basic survival or getting by, and more often these relationships are modified to excel or advance your progression. Based on presentations over the last day and half, we understand that we all seek engagement, and the reason for this is because we desire to control the direction and strength of quality of behaviours. This basically means that to get positive engagement one needs to be able to direct and shape these relationships. Controlling behaviours means that you can then predict outcomes. Interestingly enough, controlling behaviours leads to setting some pioneering rules of civility and sets the tone for a moral and ethical code of what we consider to be right and wrong. When we challenge or enforce control we are seeking to modify behaviours for more stability, reliability, predictability, dependability and persistency. We must be mindful not to underestimate the importance of these conditions.

In this moment, let's reflect on what such control brings to the nature of engagement. On the one hand, engagement is considered a tactically accessible meta-construct, bridging the nexus between latent psychological traits such as interest, curiosity, values, and measurable outputs for success and performance. On the other hand, absolute sustained positive engagement itself is a hallmark of a well-designed establishment, activity, and the underlying relationships. The converse being that sustained absence of, or even negative engagement, is seen to be deleterious and disruptive to outcomes.

In this way levels of engagement within relationships can be characterized in a similar way to weather patterns or the economic growth; with short-interval fluctuations or cycles around a marked overall long-interval trend. The short -interval fluctuations are the regular highs and lows of engagement encounters a person may experience after each interaction with a particular individual, group or activity (the relationship), and is dominated by those capricious cognitive components as moods, attention spans and situational interest. This I would like to present as little 'e' engagement.

The longer-term trends of engagement under a consistent and functional relationship is conversely dominated by personality traits, mindsets, and stable individual interests and goals. This I present as big 'E' engagement. The differentiation of little from big 'E' does not intend to convey there is a separation of meaning within engagement, rather this distinction seeks to posit that they are different activated levels both of which needs to be considered simultaneously whenever attempting to assess engagement or produce an intervention. Decomposing the concept of engagement in this way offers a twofold advantage. Firstly, it parallels underlying psychological constructs which have been elucidated and whose operations, if not mechanics, are more well recognised and understood. Secondly, the series representation in terms of trends and cycles itself, is a well-researched characteristic of many phenomenon, including, as mentioned previously, climate and the economy. This preserves the tractability and transparency of different measures of engagement, and therefore also of interventions based on engagement theories.

There are so many examples that I wanted to discuss today but for the sake of brevity, let's consider student recruitment and retention rates in the university sector, which is a timely and well-debated issue across the UK. Currently the university climate has been focused on recruitment and more so retention of students in the sector, where off course 'engagement'

is the most popular word being tossed around. Every single university institution has a policy or a guideline about engagement – the big questions are why is it not enough? And how can we get more of it?

The broad assumption is that if academics can make the tertiary learning and the general university experience more ‘engaging’ from a day to day basis then students will be more inclined to stay and complete their university degrees. Given what I have just presented, you can see that there is greater need for closer introspection of our relationships and the need to bolster what we want out of them. Selling students sexy modules with high tech activities, are certainly more appealing and are marks of progression, but is not the be all and end all of making students stay in university. Perhaps there needs to be greater consideration of how we can manage student relationships in more dynamic and creative ways. However, there is a need now more than ever to be weary of how appealing little ‘e’ activities might seem, for instance it is believed that at some tertiary institutions more contact time with students is an effective means for fostering engagement. By all means, in some instances more contact hours might be quite effective and in others less so, but we are only truly going to know if we examine the trends or do a Big ‘E’ analysis of engagement, which will help us identify the important lows of where engagement was not occurring.

Undertaking a Big ‘E’ analysis would help us ascertain patterns of engagement and gain a better insight into why the initiatives we try to promote as engagement do not work. This is but one example of how the incorporation of engagement can be cross-examined in terms of assessing the quality of the action and the level of success it generates. You might ask well how do we go about doing Big ‘E’ analysis, or how is it different from what we currently do? Well one thing that we should not, is blindly follow the policies of other universities, what works for one institution will not absolutely carry the same benefits, worse yet the long term benefits, simply on the premise that no two relationships are the same. So the starting point to search for the answer to conduct Big E trend analysis is asking the right questions that will help strengthen the quality of student relationships with the university.

The message I want to leave you with today is that when we speak of engagement we are not talking about different ideas, we are tapping into the same resource but only from different perspectives. What we are striving for is to get the clarification of this core of engagement – and it is so close, and in some ways I feel this conference has pushed us

there because we have not just focused on engagement as being the outcome, we have looked at how engagement can be present at all stages from the aim, the task, the activity, through to the outcome – we have established it is not an added ingredient splashed into the recipe for success, but rather it is added to all the ingredients used in the recipe itself. On a final note, engagement, albeit a relatively new and unruly field of research holds great potential for capturing what essentially drives our human sense of improvement.

Thank you for listening