

Researching student engagement: the application of Inquiry Graphics Analysis to develop a socio-material understanding.

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Abstract

This paper aligns with the ideas presented in the think piece by Janja Komljenovic in the sense that notions of student engagement are contextualised by how the Higher Education market is experienced at the micro-level.

The discourse associated with student engagement is extensive, it has been widely conceptualised, generally adopted as a force for good and is central to university policy in the United Kingdom. As a concept of strategic concern, it is framed by the social (and financial) contract that exists between universities and students and is moulded by marketised business models that demand 'engagement' is positioned as a measure of success. In the context of this, and the digital transformation of Higher Education, engagement data becomes an asset that may sustain mainstream views, compromise agency, and diminish the proximity of students. Although data driven insights provide compelling arguments for policy action, they may not provide the explanatory power to fully appreciate the complexity of the student experience.

This research offers an opportunity to reflect on, and therefore minimise, the distance created by data through a detailed, in-depth qualitative analysis of student experience informed by socio-material perspectives and the principles of Inquiry Graphics.

Ten participants, from across three faculties at one University were invited to reflect upon concepts linked to their engagement with learning and collate these ideas as images in multi-modal diaries. Critical approaches to materiality recognise that complex, day to day realities are mediated by the spaces, objects and relationships that constitute the human and therefore the student experience. In this respect, the images represent a bridge between abstract engagement concepts and the complex reality of individual experience. Inquiry Graphics Analysis retains the value of the visual artefact and supports a detailed interpretative dialogue offering an insight into the relationship between individual circumstances and the way students engage with learning.

The paper describes the application of this method, the process of participatory analysis and the technologies that supported this approach. It presents early findings indicating that students conceptualise engagement with learning as a highly situated and negotiated state influenced by diverse physical, socio-cultural and technological environments. It offers a qualitative and critical approach to materiality that may enhance data driven insights and support a more holistic understanding of the student experience.

Keywords

Student Engagement, Sociomateriality, Inquiry Graphics, Higher Education, Qualitative Methods