Electronic attendance and engagement monitoring policies: A critical perspective.

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Abstract

In this paper, I offer reflections on a critical discourse analysis of documents relating to the introduction of electronic attendance and engagement monitoring at a UK university. My aim is to consider the implications of using electronic attendance and engagement monitoring (also known as pre-emptive learning analytics) for the university – student relationship. The paper relates to Dr Komljenovic's thinkpiece on the challenges of digitalisation in Higher Education and considers the role of commercial providers of digital monitoring systems in enabling institutions to demonstrate responsiveness to regulatory and market requirements.

Semiotic and interdiscursive analysis was carried out on texts from three different sources: the institution, the commercial analytics software provider, and one academic subject area. Authority discourses in institutional texts indicate an ambivalent attitude to students exemplified by oscillating discourses of 'Here to help' and 'Over to you'. At the micro level, the 'Concerned tutor' discourse indicates a diminished authority position for academics who are nevertheless charged with managing student engagement on the ground.

The critical discourse analysis provides a view of the institution as managing multiple competing interests resulting in an ambivalent and confused authority dynamic with students. I suggest a shift in the discursive positioning of students from 'consumers' to 'assets' as I contend that learning analytics policies are primarily performative in nature. They generate auditable evidence of institutional efforts to improve student engagement while failing to address contextual factors that lead to non-engagement and attrition. The analysis identified discursive strategies of pathologisation and responsibilisation which result in the attribution of educational 'failure' to individual deficiencies rather than structural inequalities. This leads me to question the willingness of institutions to fully acknowledge the complex needs of some non-traditional students who, despite admission to full-time study, are effectively excluded from attendance and engagement on traditional terms.

Finally, I hope to consider the ethical sensitivity of carrying out close-up research of this kind and the 'messiness' of coming to an accurate reconstruction of the data from a critical interpretative approach. In presenting my ideas, I hope to uncover resonances with others and stimulate dialogue for further reflection for my ongoing research on the HEREE programme here at Lancaster.

Keywords

Electronic attendance monitoring, Critical Discourse Analysis, Assetization