Engagement, ethnography and the student voice: a review and recommendation for research

Abstract

Whilst the academic literature and HEIs alike recognise engagement as key to both student achievement and satisfaction, currently applied research methods restrict our ability to generate and test associated theory. To measure and understand fully student engagement we need to invoke the 'student voice', which means encouraging students to express themselves completely. However, practical efforts are constrained both by issues of respondent selection and by student's reluctance, and/or inability, to wholly 'open up'. Current research preferences conceptual reviews, questionnaires, focus groups and interviews, each of which fail to fully capture the longitudinal, dynamic and experiential nature of student life. This paper discusses the use of ethnography as an immersive alternative to surfacing the student voice. We suggest that by using the framework presented here, innovative researcher engagement can be deployed effectively to materialise *student* engagement and, in so doing, to derive rich representations of constituency experience in its widest sense.

Engagement and the student voice

The importance of understanding student engagement is now axiomatic for higher education institutions (HEIs) and academics alike (Trowler, 2010; Kahu, 2013). Student engagement provides insights into academic performance, student affect, loyalty, and – equally importantly - user perspectives on the quality of institutional life (Krause and Coates, 2008; Trowler, 2010; Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Engagement is considered subjective, dynamic, interactive and experiential, comprising cognitive, behavioural, and emotional dimensions (Krause and Coates, 2008; Healey et al, 2016; Kahu and Nelson, 2018). However, both HEI and academic research has failed to capture engagement's holistic nature and is inclined towards behaviour (Sheard et al, 2010). Further, research tends to focus selectively on aspects of student life whereas a holistic view is necessary to capture fully the student experience (Umbach and Wawrzynski, 2005; Bryson and Hand, 2007).

We believe also, that methodological conservatism limits access to the student voice. Via a review of 100 of the most recent/relevant student engagement journal articles we found 24% to be conceptual reviews/meta-studies and 76% to be empirical. Of this latter group more than 75% comprised quantitative surveys, experiments or secondary data. Qualitative research – interviews and focus groups, chiefly – represented the remainder, but evidence of 'prising open' the student voice from inside was scarce. Although focus groups, for example, can empower the student voice, data derived is relatively artificial given they frequently occur in unnatural settings and are researcher-led (Gilbert, 2008; Silverman, 2013). Focus groups, interviews and questionnaires are all prone to recall and respondent bias, and are situated for researcher convenience. By contrast student experiences are multi-faceted and contextually complex demanding rich/deep insight (Kahu, 2013). Consequently, this paper argues for an ethnography of the student voice that both captures and embodies the student engagement experience.

Ethnography in a HE context

Ethnographers use fieldwork, interviews, artefacts, informant diaries, and both real and synthetic space to interpret the natural world (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Ethnography has previously been applied in HE, but though on the increase examples are few; these include Birds (2015), Humberston (2009), Montgomery (2014) and Pereira (2015). We know of no similar studies though, that address student engagement. Ethnography is itself a broad discipline comprising different approaches: e.g. multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), virtual ethnography (Cashmore et al, 2010); and fictional ethnography (Tierney and Lincoln, 1994). Most frequently applied though, is an approach involving immersion in natural settings (Malinowski, 1922/2014; Hannarz, 2003; Gilbert, 2008) and this, we believe, best addresses the problem to hand:

1. It allows exploration of the interaction between cognition, affect and behaviour, opening up lived experiences and associating these with wider social and cultural encounters (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003).
2. It permits data collection from within natural settings. Through immersion, researchers can either overtly and/or covertly share respondent life, drawing direct and sustained contact with both community and environment (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).
3. It encourages reflexivity, and consequently "…*concerns itself with the effect of the research on the researcher*" (Attia and Edge, 2017, 35) causing the investigator to generate personal accounts in proximity to the phenomena of interest (Ponterotto, 2005).
4. It facilitates longitudinal review, allowing time for observing both regularities and changes, giving insight into the practices that constitute student's thoughts, feelings, and actions.
5. It encourages a flexible and dynamic approach to enquiry. In ethnography observation and analysis occur simultaneously, and as social life unfolds so does understanding. This leads to emergent meanings only accessible from within (Gilbert, 2008).
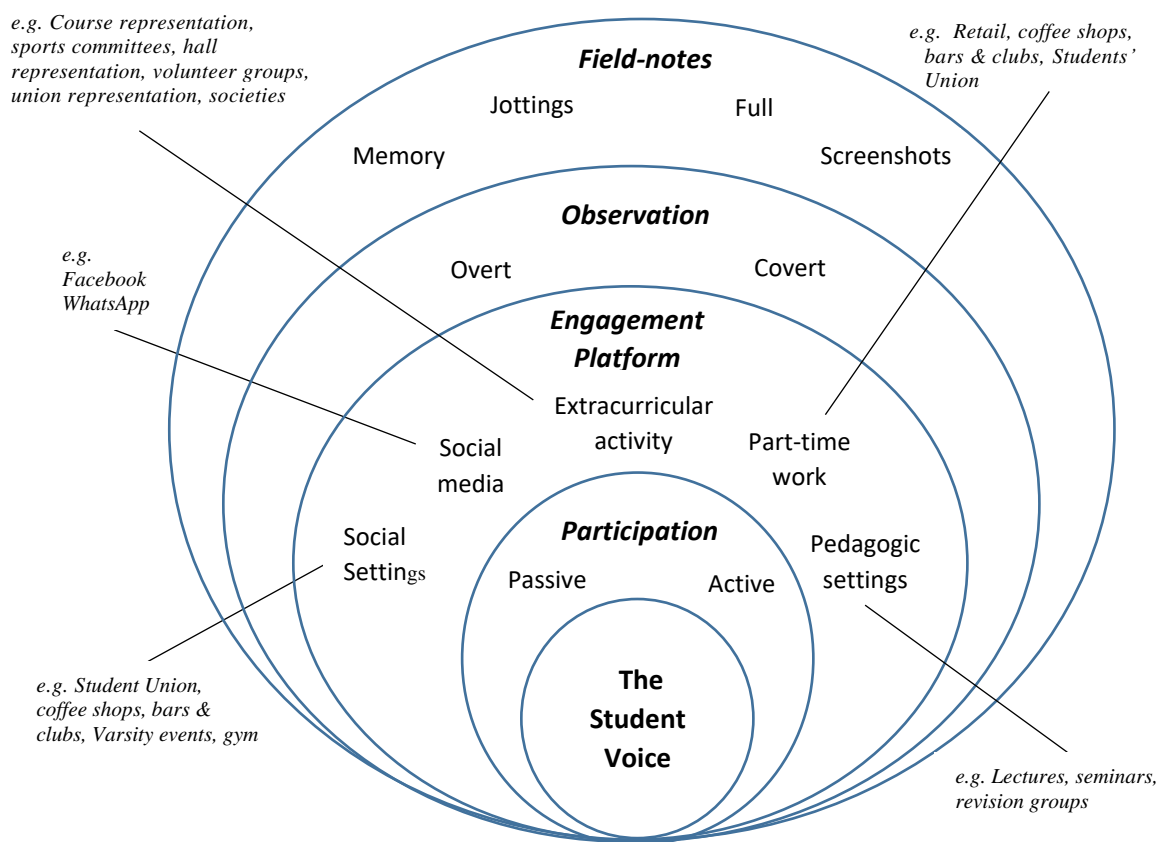

A Proposed framework for HE ethnographic research

Ethnography as a longitudinal immersive experience can fore-ground the real-time/real-life phenomenon of student engagement. For this though, research design is key. Several layers of enquiry apply (see Figure 1), beginning with the level and nature of immersion to be adopted. Passive observation involves sharing the social world as bystander, watching as experiences coalesce and unravel (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Diphoorn, 2012). By contrast, active observation entails full absorption into the social world, engaging with respopndent lives and allowing relationships to form (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Emerson, 2011)

Step two is to identify engagement platforms (practice/context combinations) that represent best the phenomena of interest. Drawing on advice both from the constituancy concerned, and from those with associated pedagogic and pastoral experience, pertinent experiences can be identified. Note that access to classrooms, social settings or shared public spaces is easier to obtain than, say, to sports or committee activities where personal and/or procedural limitations may apply. Thus, researchers must thirdly choose between overt and covert observation. Here both ethical and structural considerations apply, given that students may not want some activities observed, and that situational factors may themselves determine what is right and/or possible. Trust is an important issue for ethnographers.

Fig. 1. A proposed framework for conducting ethnographic research in a HE context

e.g. Course representation, sports committees, hall representation, volunteer groups, union representation, societies

e.g. Retail, coffee shops, bars & clubs, Students' Union

e.g. Facebook WhatsApp

e.g. Student Union, coffee shops, bars & clubs, Varsity events, gym

e.g. Lectures, seminars, revision groups

Field-notes

Jottings   Full

Memory   Screenshots

Observation

Overt   Covert

Engagement Platform

Extracurricular activity

Social media   Part-time work

Participation

Social Settings   Passive   Active   Pedagogic settings

The Student Voice

Fourth is data recording, where the demands/constraints of the context will prevail. Gilbert (2008) suggests ethnographic field notes can be 'written' in 3 ways: as memories, as jottings, as full field notes. When initially developed this typology did not account for the rising popularity of phone apps, but these are pervasive and now fully embedded within the student experience. Consequently, we recommend 'screenshots' as a further recording medium. Layer 'four-and-half' is also key. Spradley (1979) suggests, for both practicality and reliability: short notes immediately, expanded notes soon after, fieldwork journal to record problems and ideas, and running records of analysis and interpretation.
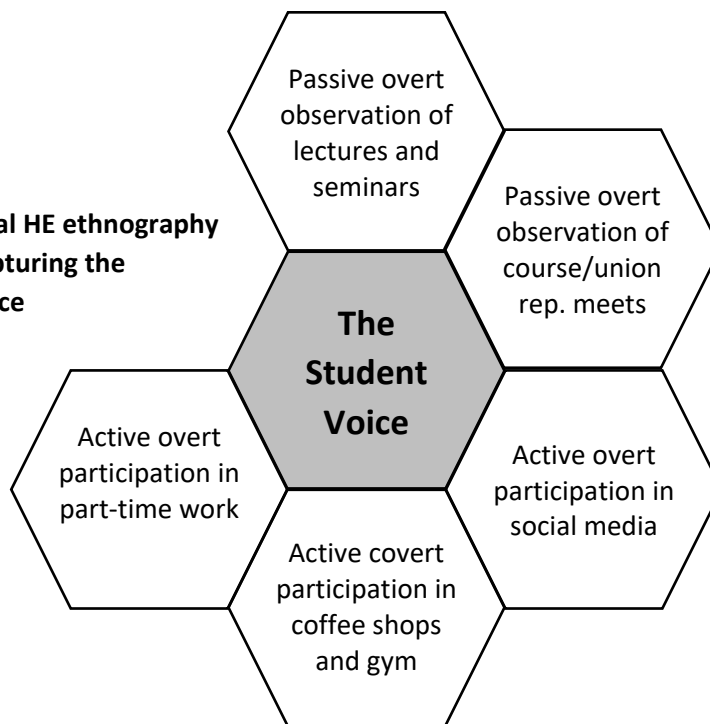
Concluding remarks

Student engagement is a key indicator of student/HEI co-creative endeavour, but extant research falls short in surfacing the 'true' student voice, and we commend an ethnographically-focused, four phase, model for addressing this deficiency. We note though, that different institutions and different conceptual frames will demand differently abstracted iterations of our framework. It should be clear, too, that demographic, cultural and personal factors associated with researchers themselves will impact preferred option viability. Ultimately, the researcher and researched must be able to interact freely and without prejudice. Figure 1 is an ideal model,

populated to provide options from which choices can be made, whilst figure 2 shows how this might typically be deployed.

Fig. 2 Typical HE ethnography plan for capturing the student voice

Passive overt observation of lectures and seminars

Passive overt observation of course/union rep. meets

The Student Voice

Active overt participation in part-time work

Active overt participation in social media

Active covert participation in coffee shops and gym

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