

Students' Perspectives on Engagement, Learning, and Pedagogy: Self-Evaluations of University Students in Spain

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Abstract

Student engagement in higher education has been studied from different theoretical perspectives and in different countries. Current issues include both concerns regarding students' attitudes and ambivalence and, in addition, the definition of the concept of student engagement and how various pedagogical approaches may contribute to contrasting definitions. The present study thematically analyzed self-evaluations of 46 students attending two pedagogy courses of the University of Barcelona; both courses included lectures and discussions. Special attention was given to how participants described their engagement and related it to their learning, the teacher's pedagogy, and the course content. Different forms of engagement emerged, both with the lecture and discussion sessions of the classes, that suggest some aspects of student engagement may (a) be invisible to the teacher and (b) follow an independent decision-making process that may favor passing over learning.

Keywords

student engagement, higher education, learning in higher education, teaching in higher education, active learning

Introduction

Poor retention rates within the higher education (HE) sector are a concern for both HE institutions and governments in most countries. In Spain, during 2014/2015, only 42.94% of undergraduates at 43 4-year public presential universities completed their bachelor's degrees within 4 years; 17.38% officially left their courses (CRUE Universidades Españolas, 2016). Student retention in HE has been associated with student engagement (Hu, 2010), a major topic of research related to learning, academic success, and different life outcomes, including mental well-being, lifelong learning, student resilience, and moral, ethical, and psychosocial development (Baron & Corbin, 2012).

Scholars have identified differences between definitions of and the kind of research on student engagement in HE in different national contexts (Zepke, 2015b). This article addresses a gap in qualitative research on student engagement in HE in Spain through a qualitative analysis of the self-evaluations of 46 students from two different pedagogy courses at the University of Barcelona. The participants' descriptions of their engagement, as well as learning and pedagogy, were contrasted with the literature on student engagement in HE. In five sections, the article describes the context of the research, provides a literature review of student engagement, including a general review and a focused discussion in relation to HE and critical perspectives on

student engagement in HE, presents the methodology, presents and discusses the findings, with a reflection on the limitations, and offers conclusions and implications.

Context of Study

Since the European debt crisis of 2010, the public universities in Spain have been under pressure to cut costs and raise tuition fees. The tuition fees of the University of Barcelona were increased by 130% in the last 8 years (Observatori del Sistema Universitari, 2018). In relation to the academic year calculated, the dropout rate for the bachelor's degrees was 9.08% (2013–2014) and the dropout rate for the first year was 17.5% (2014–2015; Technical Cabinet of the Dean of the University of Barcelona, 2018). The study of student engagement in HE in Spain is still new and shaped by practical issues, such as improving student engagement through active methodologies and information and communication technologies (Catalán Martínez & Aparicio de Castro, 2017).

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The Pedagogy degree of the University of Barcelona lasts 4 years and prepares students to design educational materials, assess educational environments, and work with children with learning difficulties and educational management outside of schools. In 2014 and 2017, polls conducted by a Catalan HE quality agency found the majority of students who finished the Pedagogy degree responded that, if they had a second chance, they would not enroll in this degree again. The same question answered by Psychology or Social Education degree students obtained a positive answer of more than 70% and 80%, respectively (Agència per la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya, 2019). These results highlight pedagogy students' frustration with their studies, although it is not clear how this dissatisfaction evolves over the 4 years of studies.

Two groups of undergraduate pedagogy students participated in this research: first-year students in a "Diversity and Education" course addressing diversity and inclusive education and third-year students in a "Diagnosis and Counselling in Education" course addressing diagnosis with tools, such as observations, interviews and tests, as well as motivation and the basic principles of counseling in education.

The teacher (the first author) was concerned about the overall lack of engagement across students in the program, as well as the lack of engagement of some students in courses where active learning methods, like discussions, were used. While peer discussion may help understanding new concepts (Smith et al., 2009) and improve student retention in science majors (Watkins & Mazur, 2013), students' resistance to group discussions is well documented and giving them information about their benefits does not seem to change their attitude (Clinton & Kelly, 2017). Also, they may recognize the benefits of an active learning model and still prefer a passive consumerist model of HE (Lobo, 2017).

The teacher was aware that (a) their engagement may be largely invisible (Gourlay, 2015), (b) there may be ambivalence toward dialogic classes (Richards & Richards, 2013), (c) no single pedagogical method pleases everyone (Dean & Jolly, 2012), (d) the university needs to fit the working lives of students (Zepke, 2013), and (e) students may be more concerned about grades than learning, although both interests are not mutually exclusive. While there is no official record of the methods used by other teachers of the Pedagogy degree, there is a growing informal consensus among teachers that an emphasis on expository classes (e.g., PowerPoint presentations) should be avoided. The first author has been shifting from expository classes toward active learning methods, including discussion and small group and whole class debate, over several years.

In both courses, the first class explained the course structure. After this explanation, the students were organized into small groups and asked to list the three elements they liked the most and the three they disliked the most in any course. Elements could be related to contents, teaching, and evaluation. Most listed expository instruction as a method to be

avoided and group discussions as a desirable class dynamic. The teacher told both groups that he would mix lectures with group discussions and other kinds of active learning, including small groups and whole class debates, and that they were expected to participate.

By the end of the term, each student was asked to write a self-evaluation of their learning process and engagement, which was seen by the teacher as an opportunity to develop self-reflexivity and expose potential tensions and resistance (Formenti & Jorio, 2019). They were asked to think critically and consider the changes they experienced in the course. In addition, appraising the contents of the course and/or the teacher's methods was optional. There was no length requirement, but a suggestion of around 500 words was noted. Students were asked to assign themselves a numeric grade, constituting 10% of their final grade, and based upon their self-evaluation, the teacher promised not to comment on or change it. However, the teacher answered all self-evaluations with his own comments on their form and contents. It was assumed that the students may try to balance their perspectives with what they assumed would be the teacher's view. In the past, the teacher had used self-evaluations, and found them a significant process for students and his own reflection on practice.

Literature on Student Engagement

Over the past 30 years, the concept of student engagement has been researched, reviewed, and refined. It gained popularity as a concept that is more complex than motivation, involvement, or belonging to explain why students drop out or lose their interest in school or HE. Currently, there is no consensus on how to define student engagement, and some authors have claimed that particular definitions were tautologies or circular arguments (Axelson & Flick, 2010; Zyngier, 2008). Fredricks et al. (2004) described three components of student engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement; however, a variety of definitions exist in literature (see Kahu, 2013; McMahan & Portelli, 2004; Zyngier, 2008). Mapping across conceptualizations of engagement (e.g., academic engagement, school engagement, student engagement), Appleton et al. (2008) found some similarity in associated constructs, such as participation, behavioral involvement, energy, effort, persistence, motivation, willingness to participate, or psychological investment. Critical scholars—like McNerney (2009), McMahan and Portelli (2004), and Smyth (2006)—have argued that disengagement may be a form of resistance when the legitimacy and good intentions of the school is questioned, in particular, in relation to student identity construction, autonomy, and agency to pursue an education broadly conceived.

In HE, the literature on student engagement includes both student-related variables and the institution's efforts (Kahn, 2014). As one example, several studies used a definition of student engagement that highlights the role of the HE institution:

“the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom, and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities” (Kuh, 2003, p. 25). Some scholars have defined a weak institution as one that expects the students to engage themselves, whereas a strong institution is directly responsible for incorporating multicultural perspectives and assuring student engagement instead of just providing services (e.g., Harper & Quaye, 2009). Furthermore, an engaging pedagogy in HE must accommodate outside influences because many students study part time and expect study to fit their lives, rather than the reverse (Zepke, 2013).

Student engagement in HE tends to be linked to quality assurance mechanisms and competitive advantage: Students are perceived both as consumers and commodities (Baron & Corbin, 2012). Academic capitalism—a concept that highlights both the public universities’ market behaviors in response to neoliberal policies and the ways in which students’ engagement is restricted to activities from which they can profit—highlights that students may try to be wise consumers, whereas teachers “face increasing pressures to ensure student satisfaction, meet progression and retention targets and at the same time raise achievement standards” (Richards & Richards, 2013, p. 776). In addition to considerations of where to attend, how much time to study, and how to organize their learning, students are becoming increasingly value conscious. They may “shop around” for a product that suits them best critically, estimating subjects to be studied, delivery modes, assessment, and time spent on campus (Kahn, 2014).

As a group, students may be polled for formal quality control but, as individuals, they may also be reduced to passive customers instead of active partners in a learning community (Little, Locke, Scesa, & Williams, 2009 cited by Baron & Corbin, 2012). In an entertainment model of teaching, education is a product rather than a process (Robinson, 2012). Similarly, in a consumerist model (Lobo, 2017), the teacher is responsible for the student’s learning who may remain in a more passive position. The resulting “passive customers” or “consumers to be serviced” attitude has been described (Richards & Richards, 2013; Robinson, 2012; Zepke et al., 2014) in relation to the fees charged by the institutions; increases in fees seem to increase students’ expectations as consumers paying for a product, that is, their degree. In the United Kingdom, student voice has been increasingly synonymous with student engagement and students have been increasingly positioned as partners (Seale et al., 2015). However, Robinson (2012) stated that HE institutions often listen only to the students who share the institution’s desired cultural capital or already agree with the institution. Indeed, it is unclear how a genuine partnership could be achieved when the students are positioned as both consumers and partners (Seale et al., 2015). For authentic engagement in HE, institutions must be open to students’ perspectives and make changes to their policies and practices. If students are only

viewed as customers, listening may be confused with customer feedback and quality control through satisfaction surveys (Robinson, 2012).

In HE, definitions of student engagement are affiliated with ideological positions. Zepke (2014, 2015a) argued that student engagement, which has escaped serious critique, must move beyond the narrow mainstream view solely concerned with retention, and academic and social integration (see Tinto, 1997, 1998). Furthermore, Gourlay (2015) analyzed implicit and explicit values inherent in the concept, as well as the subject positions and practices highlighted by an emphasis on student engagement to differentiate two forms linked with values for student behavior: A traditional perspective may emphasize engagement with the formal curricular content and a more progressive perspective may emphasize engagement beyond the classroom. Proper student engagement from one perspective could be perceived as excessively passive in another context, but “what unites the various elements of ‘legitimate’ engagement is the focus on activity which is communicative, recordable, public, observable and often communal” (Gourlay, 2015, p. 404). Thus, quiet, private, nonverbal, and nonobservable student behavior may be seen as deviant and in need of remediation. From this perspective, a student who does not ask questions is said to be disengaged; however, this could be interpreted differently as related to personal and cultural preferences (Zepke, 2014).

The alleged passivity of some university students was also addressed. Although some authors (see Almarghani & Mijatovic, 2017) emphasized the teacher’s ability to generate student engagement, others faced the ambivalence of the students toward more participatory classes. Based on Freirian and constructivist principles, Richards and Richards (2013) implemented a dialogic approach with students who used pragmatic strategies for passing assignments without engaging with the subject. While the authors wanted active engagement and reflective consciousness, the ambivalence of the students was clear: Participating in a more active way could be challenging and frightening. Simultaneously, however, the dialogic classes were seen by many as more entertaining than thinking and learning because of the lack of structure and information transmission. The fine line between encouraging the students to be active and having them leave class was also recognized by Masika and Jones (2016): “reflective writing and practices, while an important element of teaching, learning and engagement, can produce subject positions and power relations that some students find tricky to navigate” (p. 146). Thus, while trying to foster student engagement through more reflective and active learning, some teachers may end up with less student engagement and fewer students due to the student positions required by those practices.

The lack of student engagement may be explained through variables like identity and reflexivity mode. According to Dean and Jolly (2012), students may take or leave learning

opportunities based on the risks or opportunities they offer to their various identities. They may reject some learning activities to suppress dissonance and engage in others that are coherent with their purposes, values, and feelings (Dean & Jolly, 2012). Drawing on Archer's theory on reflexivity, Kahn (2014) argued that the way a student faces uncertainty shapes and is shaped by the learning environment; thus along with learner agency, there is also tutor, teacher, and corporate agency all in a network of relations. Because reflexivity modes influence the way agency is exercised, engagement may be understood by the mode used by the students and whether their preferred reflexivity mode fits the proposed learning environment. While developing trust and good relationships between teachers and students is essential for student engagement (Bryson & Hand, 2007), there is no single pedagogical method that can be considered a panacea for increasing engagement (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Dean & Jolly, 2012).

Method

Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative research was to inquire into (a) the participants' perspective on lecture and discussion classes and (b) the participants' understandings of engagement (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013) and its relation to learning, course content, and pedagogy. While the self-evaluations were individually written with the teacher as the audience, they contained critical reflexive comments about each participant's own engagement, learning, and the courses. As the evaluations were shared with the teacher, they were shaped by the student-teacher relationship.

Participants

Following the ethical guidelines of the University of Barcelona, the students who wrote a self-evaluation were sent a message explaining the goals of the research, the kind of analysis conducted, and asking for their consent. Informed consent for the analysis of the self-evaluations was 52.9% (46) in total: 53.3% for the third-year students and 52.6% for the first-year students. In both groups, the average final grade of the students who consented (46) was greater than the average final grade of the total group who wrote a self-evaluation (87). The average grade of third-year students who consented was 0.8 higher than the whole group's average grade; the first-year students who consented had a 0.3 higher average grade.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen for its emphasis on integrating theory, research, questions, and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Learning and engagement were central; thus, "learning" and "student engagement" were the first two deductively

defined themes. Then, following the six-step process, five more themes (first impressions and expectations, grades, relationships, appraisal of the course, and learning identity) were inductively outlined, and all the data were categorized into these seven themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, the three least representative themes were integrated into relevant themes. The students' statements about grades and relationships were merged with engagement because they reflected how work together affected engagement and the relation between grades and engagement. Learning identity was merged with learning as explanations of how they usually learn or had learned. The four final themes reported here were the following:

1. First impressions and expectations: contains the students' statements about their first impressions and expectations related to the course.
2. Learning and changes: contains the students' declarations about how, what, and why they learned or changed during the course.
3. Student engagement, relationships, and grades: comprehends all the students' appraisals about their grades, relationships, and engagement including its evidences, reasons, and evolution.
4. Appraisal of the course: comprises all the students' comments about the course's contents, teaching, and evaluation methods, everything they liked or disliked about them as well as their improvement suggestions.

Findings and Discussion

Differences Between the Two Groups of Participants

The students used their self-evaluations to assess their learning and engagement: Only one participant did not comment on her engagement, and almost all participants (89.1%) stated that they had changed or learned something new. The main differences between the first- and the third-year students were as follows.

1. The first-year students were the only ones who mentioned having previously studied the course's subjects. One third of them stated that they already knew some of subjects from previous vocational education and training studies and one sixth of them affirmed that they already had a critical view, as intended by the course, regarding diversity and inclusion.
2. The first-year students provided more evidence of their learning (e.g., being able to explain the course's subjects to other people) than the third-year students (23.3%–6.3%).
3. The third-year students wrote more about how they usually learned or liked to behave in class than the first-year students (37.5%–3.3%).

4. The third-year students affirmed the democratic attitude of the teacher (50%–3.3%); they supported the teacher's nonauthoritarian position in the discussions and debates. The only students who criticized the group discussion and debates were in the first-year class. This class also included one student who asked for more discipline.

While teaching methods were similar, the relationship between the teacher and each group was unique; this may explain the more democratic attitude of the teacher reported by the third-year group. The differences between the groups regarding the amount of university experience may explain the emphasis on learning identity (Dean & Jolly, 2012) of the third-year group and the emphasis on evidence of learning by the first-year students.

First Impressions and Expectations

The majority of the self-evaluations began with first impressions or expectations (60.9%), and they established a process of learning and engagement over the length of the course. There were also two stories of a lack of engagement that began with high expectations or good first impressions.

I must say that at the beginning of the course my interest was not that high, maybe because I did not know the course's subject or because I have other specialization preferences, but the truth is that my view of the course has evolved considerably and with that my interest. (Student 3, third year)

I must highlight that this course has captured my attention and interest, though at the beginning I thought that it would be completely theoretical and boring. (Student 39, first year)

The first day of the course we did a small group dynamic about labelling. It pleased me very much, I thought that the course's subject would be very different from what I had thought, and it would be something that would make me wish that the class never ended. But then my motivation started to fall, we started doing things that seemed to repeat subjects from other courses and the classes started to feel tiresome. (Student 28, first year)

All first impressions and expectations described the course contents (e.g., "useful," "complex") and the pedagogy (e.g., "more theoretical," "more practical," "boring"). Of the 28 students who mentioned their first impressions or expectations, 10 (35.7%) declared their low expectations or bad first impressions, eight students (28.6%) mentioned expectations and first impressions that could not be clearly identified as positive or negative, five (17.9%) reported high expectations or good first impressions, four (14.3%) admitted that they knew nothing about the course before its beginning, and one (3.6%) reported mixed feelings. The great majority of the participants who mentioned expectations or first impressions positioned themselves actively: assessing

course content and pedagogy to decide whether to engage more or less in the course (Kahn, 2014). Thus, they mentioned their first impressions as part of a decision process about their future engagement with the course.

Learning and Changing

Learning was not included as content for either course, nor was it defined by the teacher or discussed with the students; thus, they individually defined and assessed their learning. In their words, learning was defined as being able to change the way of thinking about a subject (54.3%) or understand and explain concepts (45.7%). Five of the first-year students affirmed that they already had a critical view toward the course's subject and 10 of them stated that they already knew most of it due to previous studies. Only eight participants (seven from the first year) mentioned evidence of their learning, such as being able to do the required tasks or debating a concept.

Now I feel that I have more empathy towards people that have special educational needs and that the most satisfying thing is to share with them and help them to be active people in society. (Student 17, first year)

Looking back from the beginning of the course to today I think that I can defend myself when talking or debating about the subjects we studied. (Student 20, first year)

The participants presented their learning in relation to pedagogy, the course content (56.5%), and to their own engagement (17.4%). For most participants, learning was defined as a positive consequence of what was offered to them by the teacher and their efforts. Only one student claimed that a positive learning context was created by the whole group because there was feedback between the teacher and the students. Another student stated that she learned better because she felt less pressure to memorize.

Personally, I learn more in classes that are not expository, I learn in classes in which all students take part in the class evolution and we can all bring in our point of view, since at the end we are the ones who are preparing ourselves and, even within limitations, we should—like we did in this course—discuss subjects that interest us. (Student 13, third year)

The methodology of reflecting, discussing and listening to the different points of view of the classmates or lived experiences or the practice of criticising current aspects of the subject has been a great way of learning about the subject. (Student 30, first year)

In addition, seven participants made statements linking their personal characteristics and their approach to learning: for example, (a) explaining how they learned (e.g., through active listening to the teacher and the colleagues), (b) describing characteristics related to their way of learning

(e.g., ‘I’m very clueless so I have tried to organize and anticipate all the task deliveries of the course’), and (c) presenting negative characteristics that may go unnoticed (e.g., “low self-esteem disguised by a big ego,” insecurities disguised by an extroverted outlook, “never a constant or dedicated student”).

Student Engagement and Relationships

Almost half of the participants (43.5%) mentioned moments of low engagement during the course, and personal unspecified problems were the justification. Only one student justified it by reducing the importance of the course and the whole Pedagogy degree.

Unfortunately, due to a series of personal circumstances that are not related to the course, by the end of the semester I was less participative and active, which does not mean that I have not done anything or have not shown enthusiasm in occasions, but I noticed a change of attitude. (Student 21, first year)

The participants wrote that their engagement was evident in activities that were “communicative, recordable, public, observable and often communal” (Gourlay, 2015, p. 404), such as coming to class, showing attention and interest, actively listening, asking questions, participating in the debates, doing the required tasks, and working with their small groups. Also, there seemed to be an issue about the visibility of their engagement as 11 students (23.9%) mentioned evidence of engagement they feared could go unnoticed or look like signs of disengagement, such as reading the course’s texts at home, asking for the colleagues’ notes whenever they could not come to class, and drawing or not taking notes while listening to the teacher. Two participants wrote that their grades did not reflect their engagement, one because of her low grades and the other for her high grades. Similarly, another student affirmed that her actual engagement was lower than her enthusiasm in class. Besides corroborating Gourlay’s (2015) concerns of reducing student engagement to public observable activities, these results highlight the complexity of assessing student engagement and the importance of listening to the students’ perspectives.

I am conscious of my little participation (null, better said) in class, understanding participation as talking or intervening during the sessions. I am a shy person and I get anxious only by thinking about talking to a group of people this big. It is not exclusive of this course; I do not intervene in almost any course. On the other hand, that does not mean that I was not paying attention in all classes. I do not take notes, I draw while I listen, it may look like I do not care, but I have actively listened to all sessions. Indeed, drawing helps focusing my attention. (Student 28, first year)

The reasons for engaging were often reduced to a match between what was proposed by the teacher and their personal

preferences; this was consistent with the research by Dean and Jolly (2012) and Kahn (2014). External factors (e.g., personal problems) were mentioned only to justify their lack of engagement and were not described. In 39.1% of the self-evaluations, student engagement was related to the teacher’s methods and the course contents with only one student affirming that he was *not* engaged because of the pedagogy and contents. Two students claimed that they engaged because they felt less pressure and another student stated that she engaged because the work was interesting and challenging.

The relation between learning and engagement was mentioned by only nine participants (19.6%): Eight of them attributed their learning to their engagement and one established the opposite, she engaged more because of her learning. The first perspective—learning following greater engagement—is consistent with the literature on student engagement. The second perspective—engagement following learning—seems counterintuitive, but two other participants stated that they engaged when there was less pressure. In these three cases, agency seemed to play an important role in engagement, as consistent with critical positions on student engagement in secondary education (e.g., McInerney, 2009; Smyth, 2006).

Getting good grades reduced my engagement in the last task, so that most of the load of the work remained in my colleagues’ hands. (Student 5, third year)

Two participants related their lack of engagement to their grades: engaging less after receiving a bad grade or because the grades were already good enough. Another student mentioned that his higher engagement during the final days of the course was due to his need to pass the course, despite his lack of motivation. Although only one student complained about the amount of work required by some evaluation tasks, the explicit relation between the amount of effort and the grades obtained was explicit in four self-evaluations. Even so, no one wrote that they were entitled to a good grade for paying the tuition fees or the amount of work done. Although they used their self-evaluations to claim that they were entitled to pass the course, passing was justified by their alleged learning and never mentioned as something that should be provided by the university or the teacher. These results do not confirm an attitude of academic capitalism (Baron & Corbin, 2012) of participants, but show the use of pragmatic strategies for passing assignments (Richards & Richards, 2013) and privileging passing over learning.

Finally, as something to improve, I think that it is hard for me to participate in the oral presentations or in class due to my shyness. This is why I usually give my opinion only when I am asked to, limiting myself to listening. In open debates where everybody participated, I was practically silent. On the other hand, when we talked in small groups, I was very wilful, innovative and talkative since I feel more at ease in smaller groups. (Student 1, third year)

Regarding my participation in class, I think that I was not 100% engaged in the class debates, since I am a quite reserved person, not for how I think, because sometimes what the others said was what I thought and believed, but because I am afraid of saying something and that the others will attack me or misinterpret my words. Besides, talking in public makes me very nervous. When I saw that I liked the course I set myself a goal of talking in class, but every time I tried, I backed off. (Student 32, first year)

As evidence of engagement, contributing to the whole class discussion was defined as engaged behavior: 29 participants (63%) assumed in their self-evaluations that they were supposed to talk during the class discussion and debates and 19 (41.3%) stated that they did not talk enough. Justification occurred by mentioning personal characteristics and preferences such as the following: shyness, being a listener rather than a talker, not wanting to repeat what the others have said, or saying something silly. Six of them apologized for their lack of verbal contributions during the debates and one student apologized for her excess of participation in the debates. Although many participants mentioned their difficulties navigating the whole-group debates (Masika & Jones, 2016), the more active classes were not presented as provoking disengagement or an uneasiness toward the whole course. Nevertheless, the characteristics and preferences mentioned by those 19 students left us with an ethical question regarding the teachers' right to demand participation in discussion classes.

Most of the literature on student engagement in HE assumes that promoting students' engagement will improve students' learning (and not the reverse), yet this was mentioned by only 17.4% of the participants. Instead, they attributed both learning and engagement to the relation between their characteristics, pedagogy, and course content, thus challenging both the causal relation between engagement and learning and the definition of engagement as an autonomous skill (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013), but confirming the association among student engagement, learning, pedagogy, and course content.

Most of the participants wrote about their engagement and learning as a process, which confirmed views that highlight the agency of the students (Klemencic, 2015). Accordingly, they decided whether to engage and in which activities. Regarding the students' academic capitalism (Baron & Corbin, 2012) and pragmatic strategies for passing assignments with minimum engagement (Richards & Richards, 2013), a few participants conceded that their engagement was influenced by their grades. Because most students want to pass the courses, an important issue would not be how much they engage, but if they engage beyond their needs of passing. Because the vast majority of studies on student engagement take learning for granted, student learning is often equated with academic achievements and student engagement is reduced to something that helps passing, not necessarily learning.

The concern of 11 participants (23.9%) about the visibility of their engagement is coherent with an orthodoxy of student engagement that sees "quiet, private, non-verbal and non-observable" practices as deviant (Gourlay, 2015, p. 405). The participants' defense of their silent, unseen, and possibly misunderstood forms of engagement demonstrates the ideological aspects of student engagement and the differences between students' and teachers' assessment. If a student is drawing while the teacher speaks, is he or she less engaged than another student who takes notes while keeping eye contact with the teacher?

The relationships among the students were mentioned by only six participants (13%), five of them with complaints about the lack of engagement of their colleagues. The only student who praised his group claimed that they knew how to allocate the workload and get the work done. Their complaints could be interpreted as a way of avoiding the responsibility for the group's failure and one participant acknowledged the different levels of self-demand and the importance of finding classmates who were equally engaged. Authors like Kahn (2014) and Klemencic (2015) mentioned the collective agency of learners and tutors, but student engagement is often an individual concept, and our participants might have perceived their engagement as fairly independent from their colleagues.

The relationship with the teacher emerged in a few self-evaluations that contained messages explicitly addressed to the teacher (e.g., "thank you for trying to make different classes"), and two participants characterized the relationship established with the teacher by saying that it was a close and personal relationship because the teacher knew all the students' names. Besides these comments, there were no other remarks concerning the teacher-student relationship, although the appraisal of the course implicitly referred to it whenever considering the pedagogy.

Appraisal of the Course

Almost all the participants (93.5%) used their self-evaluations to appraise the course (e.g., contents, teaching, evaluation). The teaching and evaluation methods were commended by most of the students. Half of them praised the group discussions and debates; no one praised the more expository classes, although three participants (6.5%) asked for more exposition and complained about repetition in discussions and the uncontrolled subject of the debates.

My presence in class was constant and I liked the way the classes were given because it broke off with the expository classes. Hence, at least for me, it eased the learning of new concepts, and you let each one of us give his or her opinion and our way of seeing things. (Student 2, third year)

The classes were very dynamic, and I think that the main goal (or at least it is one of the main things that I take from this

course) was to awaken and boost our reflexive and critical capacity. (Student 24, first year)

The teaching method has been much more dynamic and pedagogical than many other courses, and I sincerely believe that the group had a better attitude because the proposals were discussed, and the activities were more fun. (. . .) As a possible criticism, I think that the “good vibes” are very good and make better classes, but there is the possibility of a loss of control of the class, and there were moments in this semester in which I had this feeling. (Student 22, first year)

Nine students (19.6%) praised the teacher’s democratic attitude in class, especially during the debates and one student mentioned that the same group of students participated much more in this course than in others. They described themselves as actively taking part in the course, but their engagement was always presented as a response to the course’s contents or the teacher’s methods and enthusiasm, never as something built together by both teacher and students. Likewise, the teacher’s proposals were never mentioned as proper responses to the group’s willingness to participate.

Both courses included active learning in the form of small group debates followed by whole group debates, which were mostly praised by the students. Participation in class was not graded, but 63% of the participants correctly assumed that the teacher expected them to talk during the class debates and 41.3% believed they had not talked enough. Although our results confirmed the ambivalence of the students toward more participatory classes (Masika & Jones, 2016; Richards & Richards, 2013) and the lack of a single pedagogical method that works for everyone (Dean & Jolly, 2012; Kahn, 2014), they also showed a clear preference for the active methods. This raises the question of what it means to be engaged in active learning classes. Must everybody talk to be engaged? Must all 60 students speak for an equal amount of time to be considered equally engaged? Again, various forms of student engagement would have to be identified and accepted as equally legitimate without putting them in a scale from more to less engaged. While the majority of the participants used the teacher’s ideology to justify their engagement (e.g., do the required tasks, talk in the debates), they also stated that they learned and engaged in other ways.

Accepting qualitatively different forms of student engagement would require accepting different students’ positions. The opposition between partners and consumers (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Seale et al., 2015) may imply that the latter are not as engaged as the former. The participants of this study were not offered a partnership and could only choose whether to engage in the course proposed to them; they allegedly did so in ways consistent with their lifestyles and identities (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Dean & Jolly, 2012; Kahn, 2014; Zepke, 2014). Students noted they actively decided and managed their engagement taking into consideration their personal lives and preferences. For some students, heavy academic requirements may have reduced their agency and

engagement to an “all or nothing” situation. Also, because many participants justified their silence during the debates, given their personal characteristics, we wonder if teachers should equate the lack of participation in class debates as a lack of engagement.

Limitations of the Study

This research has five limitations. First, the self-evaluations analyzed were written to the teacher as an evaluation task, and students may have intended to make a good impression while critically acknowledging their own learning or engagement and praising some aspects of the course. Second, it is reasonable to assume that the students who gave their permission to the teacher to analyze their self-evaluations were more engaged than the others who did not. Third, the themes were created, modified, and discussed by both authors, but only the first author (the teacher) read and coded the original self-evaluations because they were written in Catalan or Spanish. Fourth, because the students were given flexible guidelines for their self-evaluations, all themes were not present in all self-evaluations. Finally, because all participants were Pedagogy students, they had all previously discussed teaching methods in other courses and could be expected to be more open to include more forms of active learning.

Conclusion and Implications

Based on the findings, this study has five conclusions.

Across the participants, engagement was a process that emerged in the relation between student, pedagogy, and course content. Because engagement is a process, the lack of institutional advice and options of courses and modes of study may contribute to disengagement. This conclusion highlights the need for having alternatives inside career and university advising that supports students to choose the courses that best suit their needs and intended educational and professional goals. Student engagement is not an all-or-nothing situation, and the lack of options and career advice may lead to a lack of engagement and early leaving.

There is not a single pedagogical method that works better for all students (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Dean & Jolly, 2012), but pedagogy has an important role in bridging between student and course content. Also, our findings do not completely support Lobo’s (2017): Most of the students praised the active learning methods and established a positive relation between it and their engagement and learning, but this difference could be related to the fact that our participants were Pedagogy students. Universities should encourage pedagogical innovations that foster student engagement without forgetting that there is not a “one best” pedagogy and, most of all, that students engage differently with different methods; this means that to truly assess student engagement, teachers must accept qualitatively different engaged student positions without ranking them from less to more engaged.

Student engagement with a course may be largely invisible to the teacher, which stresses the need to listen to the students' perspectives and, potentially, develop new practices in relation to what they share. Self-evaluation exercises are useful for both teachers and students because they allow the latter to reflect upon their learning and engagement and the former to have another view on a tough to access subject. Teachers' assessments of student engagement in HE should (a) pay close attention to what the students see as signs of their engagement, (b) consider that student engagement should not be reduced to meeting the teacher's expectations, and (c) examine student engagement as collective and contextual and not as a pure individual variable.

Learning should be further problematized in student engagement research. Assuming that learning can be equated with obtaining good grades or participating in learning activities or communities may have serious consequences because (a) academic results are limited by the evaluation methods used, (b) according to the definition of learning that is adopted, the grades may coincide more or less with the actual learning, and (c) engaging in learning activities or communities is not the same for everyone. In some contexts, student engagement with some academic tasks may be associated with higher grades but little learning. Likewise, students' actual learning may not be reflected in their grades. Thus, the study of the association between student learning and engagement should be studied by defining what is understood as learning without reducing it to academic results or observable participation in learning activities or communities.

This research contributes to address the gap on qualitative studies about student engagement in HE in Spain. Although our findings are not generalizable to all students of public universities in Spain, it is noteworthy that (a) only one student questioned the usefulness of the course and the Pedagogy degree and (b) no one mentioned the university fees in any way or showed any signs of academic entitlement (Boswell, 2012). Also, only four participants established a relation between the amount of effort employed and the expected grades. From our findings, it is not possible to support a hypothesis about the relation between the fees paid and student engagement or a consumerist attitude (Lobo, 2017). Further research in other Spanish public universities would be needed to establish a difference between the HE students' attitude in Spain and other countries.

Finally, this study may open new paths of research on student engagement in HE that may, in turn, contribute to a reconsideration of some university policies and practices. First, for the participants in this study, student engagement was a process. Their engagement in specific activities was a decision based on what was offered to them and their need to pass the course. Second, the students' ambivalence toward participatory classes demanded that educators reconsider assumptions about student engagement in courses where active learning, including small group discussions and debates, are teaching practices. Most participants preferred discussion classes, but admitted they experienced personal

difficulties in speaking in front of other students. Because it is not reasonable to expect all students to participate in the same way in class discussions and debates, it may be advisable to ask different research questions: what forms of engagement emerge in dialogic and participatory classes and/or how do students engage in classes that incorporate active learning, including discussions and debates? Third, this study highlights the ways in which some student engagement is invisible to the teacher. Many participants showed their concern regarding the lack of visibility and potential misinterpretation of their behaviors. Fourth, as the relation between engagement and learning is complex, studies should begin with clear definitions of both concepts. Perhaps even more important is a clearly articulated theory that grounds both concepts and highlights the relation between them. Research conducted should also articulate a logic-of-inquiry from the research questions through to the research design. Otherwise, it may be difficult to move beyond the following simplistic assumption: Engaged students comply with the institution's rules and expectations and receive good grades.

This research highlights engagement as a process, giving scholars a different way of studying student engagement. Instead of self-reports that measure student engagement, it would be useful to document students' decision-making process regarding their engagement. Finally, this study exposes places where instructors and universities can make changes that are likely to increase student engagement and student degree completion.

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