

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

IN THE DIGITAL UNIVERSITY

SOCIOMATERIAL ASSEMBLAGES



LESLEY GOURLAY AND MARTIN OLIVER

ROUTLEDGE

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL UNIVERSITY

Student Engagement in the Digital University challenges mainstream conceptions and assumptions about students' engagement with digital resources in Higher Education. While engagement in online learning environments is often reduced to sets of transferable skills or typological categories, the authors propose that these experiences must be understood as embodied, socially situated, and taking place in complex networks of human and nonhuman actors. Using empirical data from a JISC-funded project on digital literacies, this book performs a sociomaterial analysis of student–technology interactions, complicating the optimistic and utopian narratives surrounding technology and education today and positing far-reaching implications for research, policy and practice.

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Sociomaterial Assemblages

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1

INTRODUCTION

As the influence of digital technologies becomes more pervasive throughout society and education, what it means to be a student and to engage in Higher Education is changing, often in ways which appear to overturn or transform the nature of learning and the university itself. These changes are indeed far-reaching, as the way that we communicate and access information becomes increasingly permeated with digital technologies. We use mobile networked devices to interact with technologies and online platforms while on the move, which has radically altered how we lead our lives, including in educational settings. Social media use has blurred the boundaries between private and public and has opened up new opportunities to explore and create multiple ways of being online. Meanwhile, the sheer volume of online information has expanded the range of texts and resources available to students, enhancing their educational opportunities, but also presenting them – and the university – with fresh challenges.

However, there has been a tendency in popular culture and in educational circles to regard the influence of the digital as a revolutionary change unlike any other, one which will entirely sweep away previous practices and fundamentally alter all aspects of scholarship and the quest for knowledge. This is sometimes related to assumed absolute generational differences, with notions like the ‘digital native’ (Prensky 2001) becoming popularised in the mainstream media. We have also seen the rise of the notion that all pre-digital practices are inherently retrograde and should be replaced by (supposedly superior) digital technologies. These ideas, we argue, stem from a tendency to enrol digital technologies as a signifier of other ideas and values related to education – such as notions of freedom, speed and efficiency – which seductively give the impression that the digital can allow us to transcend the limits of the body and our social and material settings, or do away completely with notions of expertise or the need for teachers and so-called traditional modes of scholarship.

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This book examines how the digital is discussed and used in Higher Education and looks in particular at how these discourses and ideologies position students, lecturers, scholarship, knowledge and ultimately the university itself. We argue for a need to focus on what students actually *do* day-to-day in their independent study time, drawing on a research project which investigated the practices and perspectives of a small number of postgraduate students over the period of a year. In doing so, we argue for a ‘resituating’ of how we theorise student engagement in the digital university, moving away from categories, abstractions, fantasies and ideologies, and towards a *sociomaterial* understanding of this as embodied practice.

This chapter will identify the main themes of the book, setting these within the broader context of developments in contemporary Higher Education, and will give an overview of the book’s structure. In considering this complex topic, we will begin by critically examining two key concepts often used in Higher Education to talk about students, and we will also examine concepts and terms often used in relation to digital technologies.

‘The Student Experience’

Contemporary policies in Higher Education across the world have followed a similar pattern, with an increasing focus on ‘the student experience’. This concept has become central to discussions of educational quality, and has contributed to comparisons that form the basis of league tables, nationally and internationally (Barefoot *et al.* 2016). This move arguably forms part of a long-term change in the relationship between Higher Education and society, a relationship in which universities are increasingly expected to operate as if they were in a market and less as a form of public good. In the UK, students began to be identified as customers from the time of the government-commissioned Dearing report onwards (Dearing 1997). The rhetoric of UK national policy more recently has been to place ‘students at the heart of the system’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) 2011), positioning them as informed consumers within a competitive Higher Education marketplace. Linked to this are the league tables, drawing on data from national surveys of student satisfaction, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement in the US, the National Student Survey in the UK and the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (Richardson 2005).

Alongside this development, debates about the purposes of Higher Education are taking place; discussions about the relationship between Higher Education and industry in particular have been going on for over a century, and have arisen wherever there are universities (Taylor 1999). In recent years, however, this discussion has focused particularly on ensuring the supply of appropriately trained graduates. In the UK, Higher Education has increasingly been repositioned as a private investment made by an individual, one expected to pay off in terms of subsequent earnings, and the system as a whole has been positioned as a driver for industrial innovation and the economy. In the US, the American Association of

State Colleges and Universities identified the growth of online learning as one of its top ten priorities for 2013 – the top position being held by the need for public colleges and universities to achieve state goals through ‘overall degree production’ (AASCU State Relations and Policy Analysis Team 2013). In Europe, the European Commission’s ‘Opening up Education’ agenda focuses on the role of Higher Education in ‘boosting EU competitiveness and growth through better skilled workforce and more employment’ (European Commission 2013:2), for example through students developing ‘digital competencies [. . .] essential for employment’ (*ibid.* 6). Universities in the UK are required to provide evidence about the employment patterns of past graduates, as if this past performance enables potential students to invest their fees more wisely (Barefoot *et al.* 2016).

The concept of the student experience has come to particular prominence in the UK in a context where tuition fees were introduced and were permitted to increase to £9,000 in 2012 following the Browne Review (Browne 2010). Additionally, as Bunce *et al.* (2016) point out, the model of student-as-consumer in the UK has been underscored by the inclusion of students under the Consumer Rights Act (2015). In this climate, student satisfaction has understandably become a priority in a situation where students are required to take on substantial loans, and a consumer identity has been shown to be associated with higher student expectations (Kandiko and Mawer 2013, Tomlinson 2017). As Ramsden has argued:

They are more liable than earlier generations to evaluate the experience of higher education as part of the broader context of their social and business networks. They are more likely to complain if the support services they encounter are inadequate or do not compare to their equivalents outside higher education.

(*Ramsden 2008:3*)

However, the criticism can be made that policies and discourses positioning the individual student-as-consumer suggest a straightforward transaction via the purchase of a definable and clearly delineated product. This seems an inappropriate metaphor to be applied to an educational process which is extended, highly complex and involves a great deal of effort on the part of the student, and the effect of constructing the student-as-consumer can lead to the student being cast as a passive recipient (e.g. Molesworth *et al.* 2009). Presented as a singular concept, it can also lead to a homogenising effect. Sabri (2011) critiques the UK government policy document *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy* (BIS 2009), in particular the chapter entitled ‘The Student Experience in Higher Education’, which states:

. . . as they are the most important clients of higher education, students’ own assessments of the service they receive at university should be central to

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our judgement of the success of our higher education system. Their choices and expectations should play an important part in shaping the courses universities provide and in encouraging universities to adapt and improve their service.

(BIS 2009:70)

As Sabri argues in relation to this quote, this has led to a reductionism:

The ‘student experience’ has come to be used as a singular reified entity. ‘Student’ becomes an adjective describing a homogenised ‘experience’ undifferentiated by ethnicity, socio-economic background, age or personal history. Its use precludes questions about where and when this ‘experience’ stops and starts, how it comes about, and how it changes. . . . a reified ‘student experience’ is wielded as a criterion for judgement about what is and is not worthwhile in higher education. Contained in this quote are several demands for the exclusion of and silencing of other accounts of higher education: students are ‘the most important clients’ of HE, and their assessment of it as ‘a service’ should be central to our judgement.

(Sabri 2011:2)

Arguably, the discourse of the student experience and the related notion of student satisfaction attribute a disproportionately large degree of agency to the university, or the academics, who are constructed in this model as the active players and providers of educational experience to the student who is cast as an implicitly passive and largely non-agentive consumer. The notion of satisfaction serves to reinforce the idea of Higher Education as a singular commodity which can be judged. It also reinforces the idea that Higher Education is a clear, complete and *a priori* entity which can be identified, delineated and evaluated by the student – standing somehow outside of it – as opposed to a set of activities and practices which emerge only through the active involvement of the student in interaction with others, texts and artefacts. This point will be explored throughout this book.

Student Engagement as Performativity

Interestingly, a prominent parallel discourse has also emerged in Higher Education circles focused on student engagement. This concept underpins national student surveys in the UK, USA and Australasia (e.g. Kuh 2009, Kandiko 2008, Coates 2010), where evidence of the desired type of student engagement is seen as one of the bases of a successful Higher Education offer. The concept has been highly beneficial in relation to the enhancement of inclusion, retention and diversity in Higher Education – in particular in the US system (e.g. Barkley 2010, Dunne and Owen 2013, Quaye and Harper 2015). However, as argued elsewhere (Gourlay 2015), when the concept has been applied specifically to notions of what constitute desirable forms of ‘teaching and learning’, as opposed to broader engagement in

university life, it underscores particular ideologies about how students (and lecturers) ‘should’ behave.

In her review of the area, Trowler (2010) refers to Coates’ (2007) definition of student engagement, where specific instantiations of what she sees as good engagement are identified:

active and collaborative learning;
 participation in challenging academic activities;
 formative communication with academic staff;
 involvement in enriching educational experiences; and
 feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities.
 (Coates 2007:122)

As discussed in Gourlay (2017), there is an ongoing emphasis in this definition on observable, interactive activity, in particular *engagement with others*. Trowler (2010) contrasts this type of engagement, which she characterises as ‘progressive’, with traditional approaches, which are in her view overly associated with content, and are portrayed as retrograde and not productive in terms of supporting the type of student engagement described by Coates (2010).

In an earlier work, Coates (2007) also looks at student engagement in terms of a typology of student ‘engagement styles’ as opposed to focusing on activity types. The four-part categorisation proposes ‘intense’, ‘collaborative’, ‘independent’ and ‘passive’ as distinct. The first two are described in favourable terms, with the ‘independent’ style described broadly positively as follows, with a reluctance to collaborate presented as a hindrance (our emphasis):

An independent style of engagement is characterised by a more academically and less socially orientated approach to study . . . Students reporting an independent style of study see themselves as participants in a supportive learning community. They see staff as being approachable, as responsive to student needs, and as encouraging and legitimating student reflection, and feedback. *These students tend to be less likely, however, to work collaboratively with other students within or beyond class, or to be involved in enriching events and activities around campus.*
 (Coates 2007:133–134)

The fourth engagement style of ‘passive’ is presented as problematic by Coates:

It is likely that students whose response styles indicate passive styles of engagement rarely participate in the only or general activities and conditions linked to productive learning.
 (Coates 2007:134)

Coates’ categories seem, at first reading, to express a common-sense view, that more active students will be more successful learners. However, it is worth noting the

degree to which this categorisation reveals a strong emphasis on – and desire for – interactivity, interlocution and observable activity, and as a result, renders silence, thought, reticence and unobserved private study less valid – or even proscribed – as forms of student engagement. As MacFarlane (2017) has proposed, this has led to a performative culture which uncritically promotes ‘active learning’ and is overly focused on self-disclosure, driven by what he calls the ‘student engagement movement’. He provides a robust critique of this tendency and argues for an urgent reclamation of the notion of ‘student-centred’ learning, positing that students should be regarded primarily as scholars who can choose how they wish to engage. As he puts it:

Students should have the right to learn in ways that meet their needs and dispositions as persons. Here, I believe that the distinction often drawn between ‘passive’ as opposed to ‘active’ learning has become an oversimplified dualism that has led to the vilification of student who prefer to study in an undemonstrative manner, often on their own and in silence. Even reading, an activity traditionally core to advanced learning, has been labelled pejoratively as ‘passive’. Student engagement policies and practices promote ‘active’ learning as an essential means of evidencing learning. Yet, relying on observation is a crude means of understanding the complexity of how students learn and engage. It further distorts patterns of student behaviour that are altered to satisfy such requirements. Performative expectations such as attending classes, showing an ‘enthusiasm’ for learning or demonstrating emotions such as ‘empathy’ through as self-reflective exercise are all non-academic achievements. They are merely behavioural demands that students are expected to conform with.

(MacFarlane 2017:xiv)

This quote touches on one of the key issues and arguments we will make throughout this book – that a particular form of observable behaviour has come to stand in policy discourses for the only type of legitimate student engagement, and (more worryingly) has also come to stand as a proxy for learning itself. Anything outside of this narrow band of acceptable behaviour is discussed pejoratively as passivity on the part of the students and, if related directly to teaching, with ‘teacher-centredness’ and supposedly retrograde approaches to pedagogy. We will return to this point throughout the book when looking at what students are actually doing when engaged in silent and solitary study both online and offline. We will also return to the discourses of active and passive engagement when we look at ‘learning spaces’ in Chapter 8.

Digital Dreams and Occlusions

The notions of the student experience and student engagement tend to be applied to Higher Education in general, and the tendency is not to specify exactly what

types of experiences or engagement they refer to. However, the implication is that they refer primarily to campus-based engagement, particularly the students' experience of and engagement with taught elements of their courses, and specifically the face-to-face classroom or lecture experience. This tends to be the focus of exhortations to enhance student engagement through increased interactivity, as we will see later in the book. Arguably, digital technology takes something of a back seat in these discourses, with the role of the digital somewhat neglected or occluded in mainstream discussions of student engagement.

However, that is not to say that the digital is ignored in discourses and discussions about contemporary Higher Education – instead it is often treated separately, as if it stands outside of normal or prototypical student engagement. There is a tendency for digital technologies to be described in somewhat hyperbolic terms, in which discussions of contemporary Higher Education frequently position digital technologies as revolutionary, creating a complete break from the past, with these technologies and their effects also routinely claimed to be qualitatively entirely different to what has come before. This is often associated with the notion of root-and-branch transformation of Higher Education resulting from digital technologies, with an emphasis on exponentially increased potential for learning, and a concomitant 'breaking free' from a range of elements, which are regarded in this perspective as constraints – the human body, cognitive limitations, the immediate social sphere, geographical space, time and so on.

Although it is undeniable that digital technologies have brought about profound change and have allowed us to radically extend the scope of communication and our access to resources, we argue that the strength and absolute nature of some of these claims indicates a kind of utopian thinking, suggesting dreams or fantasies at work which perhaps relate to other desires for transcendence and freedom from what are regarded as retrograde and limiting boundaries imposed by pre-digital educational settings and practices. Arguably, the extent and reach of these changes have been exaggerated and appropriated, leading to a situation where discourses of student digital engagement have been heavily influenced by these ideologically driven perspectives, and, as a result, continuities and relationships between the digital and non-digital (or analogue) are no longer recognised, or are regarded with suspicion. This will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

Resituating Digital Engagement

As we have proposed above, arguably the two most influential concepts currently used in policy and educational circles relating to students in Higher Education – the student experience and student engagement – may be regarded as flawed in various respects. The concept of the student experience has been critiqued as overly singular, flattening and reductionist, eliding the diversity of the students in the system and their multiple and complex experiences. It also reinforces a market model of Higher Education by positioning the student as a customer or consumer.

This runs the risk of reducing the university to a commercial provider, also implying by extension that Higher Education can be regarded as either a service or a product. This can, in turn, lead to a conception of the student as a passive recipient of a singular and clearly delineated *a priori* paid commodity, as opposed to an active participant in a highly complex series of educational processes and practices.

In terms of agency, the notion of the student experience is something of a paradox. It appears (on the face of it) to empower students, and the associated policy documents purport to grant students greater influence in the sector, placing them 'at the heart of the system' (BIS 2011). As such, the term 'wears the clothes' of student-centredness. However, paradoxically, the student as an active participant seems strangely absent from the model – the framing of the concept seems to deny the student activity, agency and even the scholarship and practices required to gain a degree, positioning them instead primarily as passive recipients. The responsibility for the apparent problem to be solved is firmly situated with the universities and the academic staff, who are accused of risking failure in the mission to provide a student experience of high-enough quality and good value for money.

The mainstream concept of student engagement, in contrast, appears to focus on a perceived *lack* of student agency, particularly emphasising the need to maximise observable active and interactive behaviours in the classroom and online. Here the problem is seen as residing in students who are not exhibiting the type of behaviours identified as indicative of desirable student engagement. The problem is also situated with the universities and academic staff, who may be seen to be at fault if their pedagogic interventions do not result in or encourage this type of behaviour. This stance leads, as argued above, to a performative ideology, which positions lecturing, teaching, the provision of academic content, and even expertise itself, as retrograde and teacher-centred. This also generates a deficit model which positions reticent or quiet students as passive. Student engagement is regarded as activated by the right type of pedagogic design, activity or learning space. A further effect of the mainstream concept of student engagement is that it renders the practices of individual scholarship – essential for the development of knowledge and to produce assignments via reading, writing and thinking – as simultaneously invisible, implicitly flawed and insufficiently active.

It has to be recognised that both of these terms have come to prominence in very different contexts, the latter more clearly with the laudable intention of supporting students and seeking to understand the need for students to be motivated and to feel included, particularly those who might be disadvantaged, marginalised or at risk of non-completion of their courses. It is not our intention to criticise this broader use of the concept and the valuable associated research and development work. However, as a guiding concept theorising how we might understand the fundamental nature of learning and knowledge, we argue that it is limited in its theoretical purchase for the reasons given above. As we have seen, in

parallel to these two discourses, discussions concerning the digital in Higher Education are equally abstracted. Rather like the discourse of student engagement, discourses concerning the digital are also dominated by notions which appear, on the face of it, to be radical and liberating. But, we argue that they are also underpinned by ideologies concerning what the university should be and how students and lecturers should behave. 'Digital dreams' and utopian thinking are widespread. These concern the nature of knowledge and scholarship, but also reveal desires to break free from various perceived constraints in what we will argue appears to be a fantasy of human transcendence, but is in fact a deeply humanist model of education.

The aim of this book is to propose an alternative perspective on student engagement in the digital university, one which takes as its starting point the actual day-to-day practices of students – in other words, what students actually *do* in their scholarship, reading and writing in terms of interaction with digital and analogue technologies. In particular, our aim is to move away from the abstracted and ideological thinking critiqued above concerning student engagement and the digital, instead focusing on specific, situated practice – socially, materially, spatially and temporally. We also aim to re-theorise student digital engagement in order to move away from the notion of the human as the sole fount of all agency – the fantasy of the free-floating and unbounded user of resources, devices, texts and tools in supposedly neutral spatial and temporal contexts. Instead, our intention is to reframe student digital engagement as a set of *sociomaterial practices*, which are achieved by complex *entanglements* with nonhuman devices, objects, digital and analogue texts, spaces and time, in order to create fluid *assemblages* of practice. In order to make this case, the book will present data from a qualitative, ethnographically oriented study, which looked in detail at student scholarship practices over the period of a year. However, before looking at the data, we will spend some time taking a more in-depth look at some of the ideologies and frameworks which dominate thinking in Higher Education in order to consider their effects.

Chapter 2 looks in more detail at how the digital has been conceptualised in mainstream discourses of Higher Education, in particular focusing on how digital technologies have been hyped and claimed to have the potential not only to change but also to transform Higher Education. Exploring the notion of digital dreams, as discussed above, we interrogate what we see as some of the persistent myths and fantasies in the sector, which exercise a considerable influence on research agendas, policy, allocation of resources and ultimately mainstream assumptions about students' digital engagement. We also explore the tendency for the sector to split the digital and the analogue into a binary, assuming they are separate and unrelated realms of practice. We argue that this evinces a tendency to enrol the digital in fantasies about education and the human, both positive and negative, generating abstract concepts and leading us away from a focus on practices.