

Engaged Learning

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Definition

“[T]he concept of Engaged Learning emerges from multiple theoretical frameworks and educational practices” (Swaner 2007, 16). Therefore, different approaches to classification and definition can be identified. Definitions might focus on the learners (Swaner 2007, 19), on the learning process and its products (Schreiner 2009, 43), or on engagement with communities beyond the learning institution itself (Jacob et al. 2015, 1).

Engaged learning is a broad, inclusive umbrella term (Lund and Wright 2017, 652) for the pedagogical approach that enables students to derive learning from meaningful community engagement while working on real-world problems. “We define Engaged Learning as the process where students apply the theory learned at Higher Education Institutions to a context outside of Higher Education Institutions by addressing societal concerns, challenges or needs while producing knowledge in an equitable, mutually beneficial partnership” (Marsh et al. 2021, 23).

Some publications use engaged learning as a derivation from the more common *service learning* (Sachs and Clark 2017, 54). However, the replacement of “service” with “engagement” is accompanied by a fundamental change in meaning. While “service” aims at support, help, or a remunerated offer, “engagement” goes hand in hand with a socially emancipated attachment and a personal dedication to a cause, and is oriented towards the well-being of all actors concerned. Activities of academic teaching and learning are combined with civic engagement (Bandy 2011). Engaged learning, also referred to as community-engaged learning (Bandy 2011; Berard and Ravelli 2021), builds on ideas of service learning, but puts an even stronger emphasis on community involvement. Civic communities should make a significant contribution to the design and implementation of engaged learning initiatives, while independence in the development of solutions and innovations should be preserved to prevent conflicts of interest. This refers to engaged learning’s underlying principle of reciprocity, which can be described as a state in which all partners mutually benefit from the actions of the respective counterpart

(Weyer 2014, 49). While service learning has increasingly developed into a distinct teaching method with recognized quality standards (Aramburuzabala et al. 2019) and processes for institutionalization (Bringle and Hatcher 1996), engaged learning takes the opposite approach and tries to gather as many methods and concepts as possible in order to work out their common core concern and educational understanding. This can be seen as an attempt to dissolve and unite the previous parallelism or even competition between approaches that are similar in essence.

At the universities, engaged learning is understood “as part of a third mission” (Chmelka et al. 2020, 11), i.e. as activities of a higher education institution that take place in the context of teaching and research without being teaching or research alone (Henke et al. 2015, 5). In terms of mission, the experiences of people outside academia need to be recognized and included in academic teaching and learning. In this way, engaged learning is an approach to transformative science which not only observes social transformation processes and describes them from the outside, but also initiates and catalyzes change processes itself (Schneidewind 2015).

From a systemic perspective, engaged learning is a transdisciplinary approach. It aims to overcome the increasingly contested boundaries between society and science. At times this means “unlearning” or perhaps just challenging some concepts traditionally taught in secondary education and introducing learners to the world of science from divergent perspectives. Academic teaching in the sense of engaged learning involves actors outside the university in the teaching process and tries to take into account the identified needs of all stakeholders. In this way, the previously separate systems of society and science are blended, preventing the infamous ivory tower of higher education and instead making the university increasingly more relevant to society as a whole.

Background

The term engaged learning is obviously composed of two words – engagement and learning. Both are as familiar as they are loaded with assumptions. It is, therefore, advisable to explore the specific understanding and link between engagement and learning in engaged learning.

Educators think of engagement in four related but different ways (Bowen 2005). The most fundamental is student engagement with the learning process: just getting students actively involved. The second is student engagement with the object of study. Here the emphasis is on the stimulation of students’ learning by direct experience of something new. Another is student engagement with contexts of the subject of study. This gives emphasis to the importance of context as it may affect and be affected by the students’ primary subject. When social and civic contexts are considered, this inevitably raises ethical issues. Finally, there is

student engagement with the human condition, especially in its social, cultural, and civic dimensions. Engaged learning is born from this fourth aspect.

The idea of learning as reflected experiential knowledge, gained through civic commitment in social settings facing actual problems, points to the work of researchers and theorists on learning, as well as on the purposes of education itself. One of the first foundations for what we now call engaged learning is Marx's statement that the purpose of scientific work should not be understanding the world alone, but rather the transformation for the better that goes with it (Marx [1888] 1976). Later, Pasteur revealed the value of practical teaching combining the awakening of a love for science with an interest in the needs of the surrounding community (Vallery-Radot 1906, 75–86), making a case for engaging approaches. John Dewey (1938) revealed the interconnection of education and democracy, where the relationship between education and civil society were highlighted. For Dewey, teaching practice, through interaction, could reveal a better starting point of direct inquiry. In this way new material, factual and conceptual, is disclosed, material which is more relevant, more weighted and confirmed, than were the initial facts which served as the point of departure (Dewey 2008, 145). At the end of the 20th century, educational researchers increasingly questioned the teacher-centered (Henson 2003) and low-activation approach (Kolb 1984) of traditional learning. The concept of engaged learning draws from both Kurt Lewin's (1946) contribution with Action Research and Donald Schön's (1987) observations that the problems that concern people outside academia resist purely research-based, technical attempts to solve them. Engaged learning must therefore be grounded in the respective social reality of life and, at the same time, strive to overcome problematic conditions within it.

Engaged learning has evolved from these philosophical traditions into a higher education agenda, which responds to the recurring demands for greater educational effectiveness, economic efficiency, political relevance, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability of higher education institutions. The normative imperative of engaged learning (Sachs and Clark 2017, 54) is to see higher education institutions not above, but at the same level and as an integral part of the surrounding social life and to make appropriate contributions to living together. This can also be seen as a strategic approach to bring scientific expertise into the public debates and as an attempt to maintain or expand the relevance of higher education institutions in times of great social upheaval and crisis-driven historic turning points.

Debate and criticism

It is obvious that an agenda alone is not enough to overcome local, let alone global challenges. Engaged learning requires cross-sectional partnerships, where all involved must be willing, able, and committed to work together on complex challeng-

es, at least in the medium term. One of the best ways to open the debate and criticism of engaged learning is to understand the potential and challenges to working across the disciplines together with working directly with community partners. For scientists, engaged learning may lead to new research directions or reinforce existing research lines (Van der Windt et al. 2014, 7). In the field of teaching, engaged learning opens up the “opportunity to [co-]educate the next generation of professionals, citizens, board members, policy makers, and donors” (Worrall 2007, 11). But for this to occur, the doors of universities, which form a boundary between the relatively safe and autonomous academic world and the pressing concerns and limitations of the outside world, literally must be opened (Oonk et al. 2020). One of the clear challenges is that partnerships between communities and universities need to be developed, with building sustainable partnerships “often requiring enormous investment in human and social capital to build sufficient trust in relationships to enable the co-creation of possible solutions. This ... requires time and perseverance” (Sachs and Clark 2017, 44), meanwhile taking into account the multiple perspectives and interests of all stakeholders.

Following a current engaged learning toolkit discussion (CaST project 2022), four different groups of interest can be identified: students; teachers and staff at universities; community partners; and policymakers. For students, learning formats should support them in achieving the formal requirements to obtain an academic degree and prepare them for a subsequent professional career, while at the same time developing self-determined and critical personalities. Students who participate in engaged learning initiatives find it gratifying, particularly because teamwork and open communication, which tend to play a subordinate role in the usual course of studies, take on concrete meaning (Nieto-Herman and Viera 2019, 5). For teachers and staff, engaged learning initiatives should be compatible with the multitude of other tasks, like ongoing research and third-party-funded projects. It should be recognized as a valuable teaching approach that is not only fruitful for student learning and development, but also contributes to furthering the university’s third mission, as well as rewarding teachers who contribute to it. Community partners highlight the need for sustainable partnerships. These relationships may include associations, municipalities, companies, or agencies. Many desire permanent contacts at the university, and connections with students, whose cooperation helps to address challenges. For this to be viable, expectations must be managed at the initial stages of project development. And finally, for policymakers, the agendas proposed and concepts developed by engaged learning should be practically implemented and evaluated to serve as a basis for new decisions and governance.

Once the various stakeholder positions are explored broadly, the debate moves towards a deeper understanding of collaboration across academic disciplines. The need to “manage the expectations of external partners” (Anderson 2022, 154) is highlighted in recent publications on engaged learning. At the same time, col-

laboration within the university itself needs to consider discrepancies in teaching and research styles across the disciplines. When disciplines with different learning modes are supposed to work together, this can lead to misunderstandings (Barron 2002). Clearly this is a contextual issue, for complex real-world problems have no disciplinary boundaries. Teaching and learning on those problems is therefore conducive to conflicts across the disciplines, which can provoke new combinations of experience and knowledge that are the basis of innovation (Nonaka and Konno 1998).

By recognizing the diversity of perspectives and interests, the complexity of previously underestimated issues becomes clear. From this point of view, engaged learning has the potential to increase the awareness of inter- and transdisciplinarity as a necessity for tackling the most urgent sustainable development goals.

In addition to discussing issues related to building understanding and stabilizing partnerships, the actual substantive work in engaged learning initiatives is “intensive and time-consuming”, while the immediate “benefits for staff are less clear” (Anderson 2022, 28). After all, the investment of time and perseverance does not necessarily pay off for those seeking a long-term career in higher education institutions. Some even argue that excellent research is the only way to gain a reputation in today’s academic system and ultimately to advance one’s career as a university teacher (Schneidewind 2016, 14). As a result, even such pioneers who can overcome the first hurdles and are highly engaged in building partnerships, as well as implementing initiatives with content, risk missing promotion opportunities due to a delay or lack of presentable outputs which can be turned into publications or grant applications. The loss of even one committed individual often means setbacks or even termination of the initiatives, since their fundamental “[l]ongterm, healthy, sustained partnerships are grounded in personal relationships” (Worrall 2007, 5).

Implementing initiatives at appropriate interfaces between higher education institutions and external partners, as well as ensuring their sustainability, are the two biggest challenges for the realization of the engaged learning agenda and often are not possible without additional external funding (Anderson 2022).

Current forms of implementation in higher education

So far, the term engaged learning has not been theoretically developed or used in a distinctive way in daily speech, across various languages and professional action. In order to function as an umbrella term, it has many overlaps with other concepts such as service learning, science shops, community engagement, outreach, international cooperation and development, third mission, and many more. Because of this, it is not yet possible to make a global statement about the state of implementation in higher education. Here, basic and applied research in international alliances is needed to close the gap and to establish a common understanding of

the term or a systematization according to certain characteristics. For the interdisciplinary communities of science and higher education research in particular, it will, indeed, be intriguing as the lofty idea of engaged learning begins to be a matter of concern (Latour 2004) or fact, as it is implemented; a place where good intentions are put into action.

The current state of research on the implementation of engaged learning in higher education is based on general observational findings and experience-based perceptions on the one hand, and on regionally and culturally limited findings on the other. Purposeful movements towards greater social responsibility in universities can be observed around the world. Initiators can be the universities themselves, as well as reforms initiated by educational policy, and municipal and regional communities, together with alliances of committed individuals. Since engaged learning emerged from service learning, which originated in the United States, the dissemination of engaged learning formats has progressed furthest there, while in the Asian region, China and India are identified as drivers of this development (Ma 2018). Science shops that offer independent, participatory research in response to the challenges of surrounding communities open up spaces for accompanying engaged learning. They originated in the Netherlands and have spread from there since the 1970s through global networks such as LivingKnowledge.

The fact that the conceptual understanding of engaged learning varies greatly depending on cultural, political, economic, and social contexts up to local levels of analysis and even in increasingly harmonized higher education spaces is shown by the reports of the European ERASMUS+ funded project Communities and Students Together (CaST). The project examined 28 engaged learning initiatives in six European Union countries in terms of structures, processes, resources, stated aims, outputs, and benefits for participating groups as well as evaluation. It noted enormous variation in approaches, access to resources, and the degree of institutionalization. CaST partners commented: “Each [initiative] varies in structure and approach, as well as size and the availability of resources. The initiatives sit within a diverse range of university disciplines, and tackle an array of societal challenges” (Chmelka et al. 2020, 7). In addition, results showed that “[t]he degree of institutionalization of the programmes also varies substantially, with some having a more structured (and well-funded) approach from a higher, university level while other initiatives are working predominantly at an individual level with little to no funding from the university or elsewhere” (Chmelka et al. 2020, 7).

What all engaged learning initiatives have in common, despite their differences, is that they seek to connect the education of students in terms of both professionally relevant skills and social maturity with current real-world challenges by evoking encounters between local actors from which collaboration and exchange should emerge. To achieve this, all of them initiate transition zones between organizations, institutions, and systems to function as spaces of shared understand-

ing and mutual trust; they serve as intermediaries of relevant information and facilitate joint projects in which participants can both contribute their specific skills and learn from each other (Penfold and Goodman 2011; Urias et al. 2020). Since engaged learning always goes hand in hand with scientific problematization of social conditions, the transformation of these conditions or their causes is always a declared goal of all initiatives – be it the expansion of ecotourism in eastern Sri Lanka, the provision of tutoring services for pupils in the coronavirus pandemic, or the critical examination of infrastructure projects in inner cities. For this reason, any attempt at implementation always means the involvement of higher education institutions in sociopolitical controversies, the settlement of which is accompanied by the establishment of interpretive sovereignty or majorities in decision-making situations, taking opposition into account.

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