# Review of the Book "Advancing Student Engagement in Higher Education: Reflection, Critique and Challenge", edited by Lowe (2023)

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Students can engage in higher education in different ways: behavioral, emotional, cognitive, or in any combination of those. Traditionally, this is seen as engagement with the curriculum inside the classroom, but increasingly the view of student engagement is widened to include forms where students take more ownership of their own learning, for example when becoming involved in (re)designing curriculum, co-creating learning opportunities, influencing learning on a program level, or influencing the bigger setting through engagement with services like university libraries, or in developing extracurricular opportunities like religious diversity training. Students can be involved in a number of different ways, for example as a whole class, as representatives of a class, as consultants that may or may not currently be enrolled in the course or program. In the book "Advancing Student Engagement in Higher Education: Reflection, Critique and Challenge", Lowe (2023) brings together 25 chapters from 36 contributors, exploring and highlighting different aspects from very different perspectives. If you are looking for a shortcut to reading this book, I recommend the first chapter by Lowe for an excellent overview, and then picking and choosing chapters on different topics. I am here summarizing my own takeaways of the whole book.

In the common discourse in educational development, working towards increased student ownership of their own learning is generally seen as positive. But it is advisable to reflect explicitly on our aims and their implications. We accept that students are experts on what it is like being a student right now. They are a different generation from back when we, their teachers, were students; with different lived experiences, with major life events, some as disruptive as a global pandemic, happening at a different stage of their lives, different political, economic, and social conditions, different ways of creating and sharing content, just to name a few. Using this expertise can help us improve learning experiences and learning outcomes, but we can do that instrumentally to improve the quality of education in a neo-liberal sense, or we can do it with the aim of liberating and empowering, welcoming different ways of knowing and diverse backgrounds. This is a challenge for us as teachers: We are in a position of power, and we are gatekeepers of structures and values. How much responsibility are we really willing to share, how much power willing to give up, and is that aligned with our goals and values?

As teachers, we have power not only to prescribe learning outcomes and assess whether they have been achieved, but also to influence the conditions under which the learning is to take place. Even when aiming to work in partnership with students, we have the power to set the nature and scope of the partnership project, we can choose times, places, ways of inviting into and communicating about the project that — to a larger or lesser extent — create barriers or alienate (a subset of) students. So we need to be aware of who we are explicitly and implicitly inviting into cooperation: Only those with a typical student experience on campus, those without caring responsibilities,

those with enough confidence and social capital, those that are willing to rock the boat, those who know how to write a traditional academic application? If we offer payment for student involvement in order to level the playing field between students who can afford to spend time on working with us in our project and those who cannot, are we maybe building a different set of barriers for those students who cannot have paid employment due to e.g. immigration status, and does being paid influence the power dynamics, and what students feel can be said?

Even if we feel like we are inviting all students into conversation, there is still a question of representativeness when it comes to the student voice that we hear. It is likely that we hear most from the already highly engaged students, even though there is no such thing as one student experience, and a few, highly-engaged students might have very different experiences and opinions than many other students. Does that mean we should move towards whole-class approaches (but then what about students that explicitly do not want to engage in that way?), or how else can we address "sample composition" to get a representative impression, without putting a burden on minorities to automatically become a spokes person?

And then, how do we know what impact our projects are having? When we start thinking about impact, we need to again be very clear about our aims with the whole project, but also with the evaluation itself. Are we evaluating for quality insurance purposes, for research, for development? And in the light of how student engagement can be expressed, e.g. behavioral, emotional, cognitive, what kind of data can actually help us answer the questions we have? And are all students aware of what types of data we are collecting, how we plan to use, analyse and discuss it, and do we have their consent? Involving students not only in generatjng ideas for action, but also in evaluating the impact of the actions that get implemented is crucial in order to interpret data correctly and to report on it, and the actions that should be taken based on the outcomes, in a way that is representative of how students think about it. This step could be hugely empowering and liberating, yet it is often not taken.

Also, barriers to student engagement that we should address might be far outside of our own classroom. We might, for example, over-emphasize extracurricular activities in an attempt to create a shared social identity and sense of belonging, yet might therewith demand over conformity. Assumptions about who our students are and what matters to them can limit how welcoming we are towards, for example, the 50% of the UK student population that identify with a religion or belief (a number that is a lot higher than I might have guessed). How can we make sure that all students experience ownership of their higher education experience, and feel empowered and liberated? This is where we as teachers need to commit to a reflective practice and come back to all the above questions and many more, and critically reflect on our own role, how we lead, how we gate-keep. The book does give a lot of ideas for what we can try to adapt to our own context to work towards "advancing student engagement in higher education", and it delivers on it's subtitle of "reflection, critique and challenge". It is definitely worth a read (and repeated long, hard, think)!

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Lowe, T. (Ed.). (2023). Advancing Student Engagement in Higher Education: Reflection, Critique and Challenge (1st ed.). Routledge.
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